

A History of the Corner Store

By Laurel Ellis and Stuart Strothman

There has been a general merchandise store on the site of the Putney General Store, and possibly in the same building, for over 200 years.

The land on which the store stands was originally part of the two-acre sawmill property when Charles Kathan was said to have erected the first sawmill in Putney circa 1765. Shortly before his death in 1793, Kathan sold the two acres to Samuel Works of Westmoreland who made a profit of six pounds when he sold the parcel to William Sargeant of Dummerston and Jonathan Sargeant of Ware, Massachusetts the same year.



FURTHER READING:

- [Rebuilding from Here: A history of the store's rebirth](#)
- [The many owners of the Putney General Store since 1796](#)

Between 1796 and 1799 William Sargeant and his partner John Griffin built a new store "which stands on the easterly side of the stage road and nearly opposite John Goodwin's dwelling house" (the current Putney Tavern). William and John also built a battery shop close by which shared a "common door yard." At that time the "county road" leading north crossed Sacketts Brook a few yards west of the store.

As John Griffin has previously operated a store (roughly across from the current Putney Central School) since 1784, we guess that Griffin ran the new store while Sargeant ran the sawmill. Griffin doesn't appear to have been a good business man, or perhaps just had a taste for the too-expensive, as he suffered several judgments against him at different times. When Sargeant came to his aid for the sum of \$550 in 1798, Griffin gave him, title to the following: "one case of drawers (?) valued at \$30; one clock...\$40; three beds...\$60; one stallion horse...\$100; one bay, two French horses and one colt coming two years old and two cows...\$200."

Griffin sold his half-interest in the store and land to Sargeant in March of 1801 for \$280. Four days later Sargeant sold the whole parcel for \$700 to the partnership of (Samuel) Chandler and (Levi) Bigelow. Chandler later removed to Woodstock and Bigelow to Derby, leaving their agent Benjamin Smith in charge of their several operations in Putney.

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In 1811 Smith mortgaged all of Chandler & Bigelow's Putney holdings (including the store parcel, a "distillery," "oil mill," "gristmill spot" and "tannery bark house") for \$5,053.53 to Stanton and Spelman of Boston who foreclosed in 1815. By 1819, Smith had reacquired most of the properties in his own name. He then sold the eastern (sawmill) portion of the original two acres for the new paper mill but retained the store until 1823. His deed indicated that it was the "same store and shed which I have occupied for many years past."

In 1823, Asa Keyes 2nd, Israel Keyes, and Joel Keyes (all of Putney) and Asa Britton of Chesterfield, New Hampshire bought the store "in trust" for James Keyes and Isaac Groat at a price of \$850. Groat relinquished his interest to Keyes in April of 1826 shortly after purchasing the store to the west [formerly the Putney Co-op, currently the Silver Forest store] from Phineas White.

In 1837 James Keyes, who also owned the woolen mill, signed the corner store over to David Chandler and John Smith, "assignees of James Keyes in trust to pay his creditors," for \$1,200. At that time it was called "the White Store."

In 1838, Peyton R. Chandler paid \$1200 for the property and within a month deeded it to David Chandler for \$1300. A bond was signed with F.A. Wheeler and John R. Miller in 1839 for the "West end of the P.R. Chandler Store lot." The new store [the former Mellen's Store, now Offerings] was deeded with "all stock in trade, goods and merchandise" to Foster A. Wheeler in 1841.

In 1846 the corner store's title was transferred to Peyton R. Chandler and Rollin W. Keyes, who were operating the store as "Chandler & Keyes," at a price of \$1500. Calvin W. Keyes paid the same price in 1850 and took Haynes E. Baker of Newfane on as a partner via \$1000 mortgage. "P. R. Chandler & Co. also sold "Baker & Keyes" the Fairbanks Hay Scales.

Alexis B. Hewitt bought the property and one half the business including one half of the Fairbanks Hay Scales in 1857 for \$1200. Hewitt continued a business partnership with Baker and later Austin F. Kelley. In 1882 Hewitt and his wife Abigail sold the "Corner Store" and "one Howes Hay Scale" to Herbert E. Wheat for \$1,700.



In 1886, Wheat sold one half interest in the store, horse and shop over the horse to Adelbert M. Corser for \$962.50. In 1889, Corser and his wife Minnie bought the remaining half for \$950. From this era on there is no shortage of photographs, as Corser was an active photographer. Many of his glass plate negatives and photos are now in the possession of Putney Historical Society (PHS) and available for making prints.

In 1915, the "A.M. Corser Store" became the "S.L. Davis Store" operated by Simon and Nyrá Davis, previously of Westminster. The Davises hold the record for the longest proprietorship of 34 years. In 1949 it became "Cummings Store" run by Oscar and Bessie Cummings. In 1966 it was "Fickett's General Store" owned by Albert and Mary Fickett. In 1974 Robert and Anne Fairchild and family, formerly of Brantleboro, began their era on the corner as "Putney General Store." After 26 years of proprietorship the Fairchilds turned the keys over to Dan Mitnik and Shari Gliedman in 2000.

Dan Mitnik sold the business to Erhan Oge and Tugce Okamus in 2006, making them the 18th owners of the historic Putney business. They hired a manager, while simultaneously managing Putney Village Pizzas, across Rte 5, from the store. Then, disaster struck — at 9:52 p.m. on Saturday, May 3, 2008, the call came in to the Putney Fire Department: the General Store was ablaze.

Even before the fire, running the business had not been easy. "It's hard when there's a Price Chopper, a Hannaford, and a Wal-Mart," according to Dan Mitnik. Oge noted that between the gas prices and bad winters, with little snow and few tourists, many businesses have had a hard time. Mitnik said, "I hope the General Store comes back. It's certainly the center of Putney — a cultural and social hub."

Oge said there was no explanation for the fire; Mitnik said there was "definitely old wiring in the building," and Putney fire chief Tom Goddard said it was "not suspicious." In a turn of bad luck, a sprinkler system was recently installed, but not in the attic where the fire apparently started.

In June, Oge said he expected the insurance "may cover about half the inventory," but as for the building, he had no idea. He thought that in a few weeks, they'd get estimates. "I'd like to rebuild," he said at that time. "but I know it's going to suck a lot of money."

A post on the town's site, iPutney.com, said Town Manager Chris Ryan reported "a great outpouring of volunteers, both with hands-on construction abilities as well as folks willing to lend a hand with finding appropriate grants and other tasks... it seems that there is great community support for the owners in their desire to rebuild, with talk of fundraisers to help the cause, if necessary." Clearly, there was a desire to have the Putney General Store gracing the village center again, along with the town green, the Putney Tavern, the Putney Paper mill, the Putney Diner, and the Town Hall.

Oge noted, "I love the building; that's why I bought it." He later added, "it doesn't matter who owns it — Putney needs that store."



Since then, former Selectboard member and current board member of the Putney Historical Society, Lyssa Papazian, in helping Oge to seek grants and tax abatements, determined that it might be best if a nonprofit stepped up to take ownership and thereby become eligible for state and other grant sources. The Putney Historical Society took up this charge, and with the help of Paul Bruhn of the Preservation Trust of Vermont, purchased an option in late August to buy the property for \$105,000 by October 1, 2008.

In September 2008 PHS raised approximately \$10,000 in community donations, and secured charitable guarantors to back a loan of \$100,000 for acquisition of the property. PHS also has plans for a further loan, so that stabilization of the property (cleaning it out, putting in a new frame and roof) can occur right away. From there, there are different options for the next phase of renovation, but PHS is committed to restoring a general merchandise store in the historic building. After three separate meetings, including its annual meeting at the Community Center in which there was very strong support from members, a subsequent task force meeting, and a formal PHS board meeting on

September 27, PHS has decided to move ahead with acquisition and stabilization. We are shortly to be the 19th owners of the corner store!

Note: Most of this article was previously published by Laurel Ellis in the Putney Historical Society's newsletter in 2000; much of the rest was published by Stuart Strothman in The Commons, in an article entitled "Fire Blackens the Heart of Putney," in June 2008.