

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

historic name H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office
other names/site number #RU 352; Smith Bros. Store; Hollis M. Smith Store

2. Location

street & number 279 South KY SR 76

NA
NA

 not for publication
city or town Fonthill vicinity
state KY county Russell zip code 42642

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,
I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

 national statewide X local

Signature of certifying official/Title Craig Potts/SHPO Date _____
Kentucky Heritage Council/State Historic Preservation Office
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official _____ Date _____

Title _____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

 entered in the National Register determined eligible for the National Register
 determined not eligible for the National Register removed from the National Register
 other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper _____ Date of Action _____

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property

Category of Property

Number of Resources within Property

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	private
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Federal

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

<u>Contributing</u>	<u>Noncontributing</u>	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE/TRADE: Department Store

COMMERCE/TRADE: Specialty Store

GOVERNMENT: Post Office

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

OTHER: Early 20th-century rural country store

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: CONCRETE

walls: METAL

roof: METAL; SYNTHETICS: Rubber

other: _____

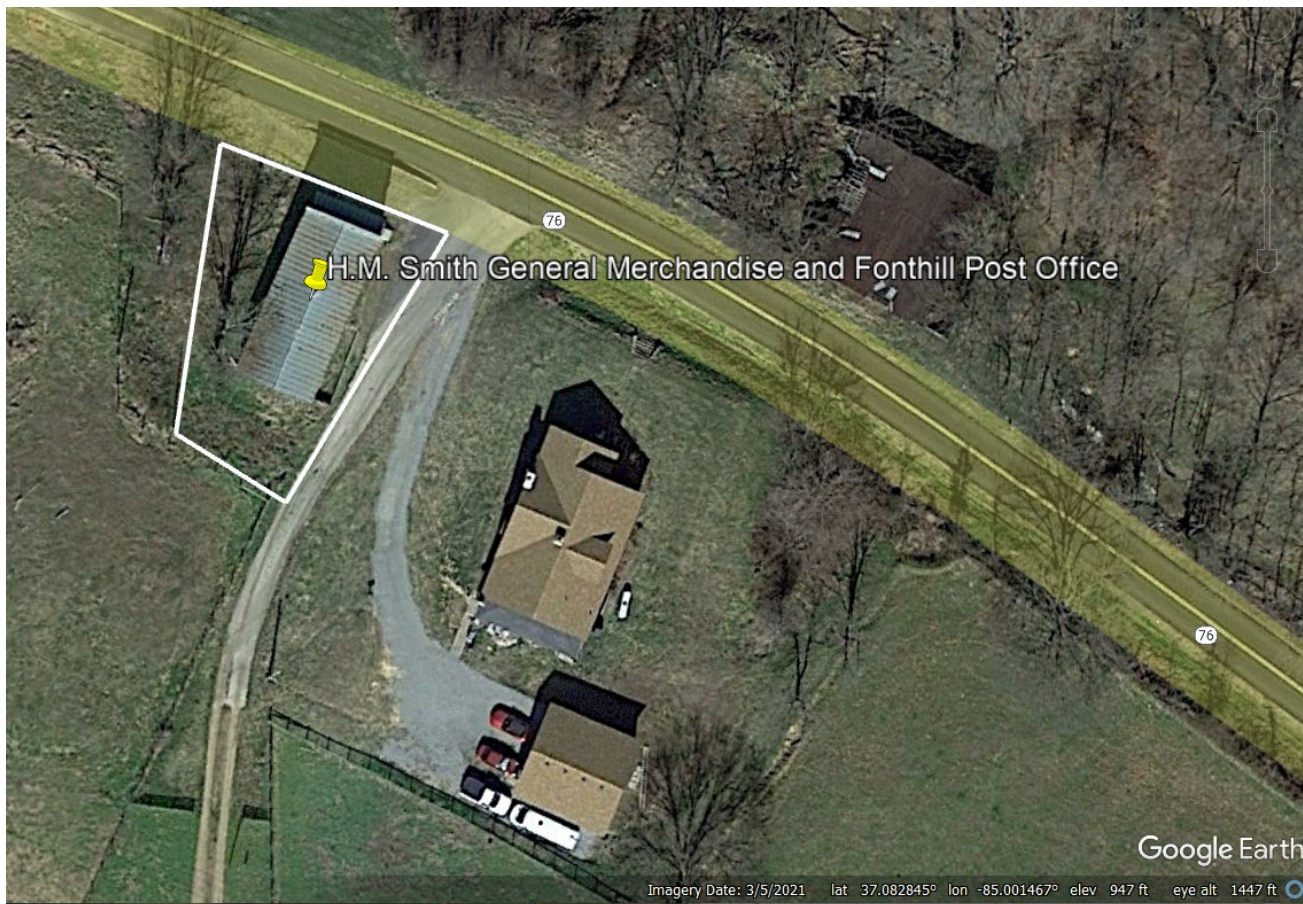
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Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

The H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonhill Post Office (RU 352) is located on KY State Route 76 about 1/4 mile east of the intersection with KY SR 80 in the small unincorporated community of Fonhill,¹ situated in a rural area about 10 miles northeast of Jamestown, the Russell County seat, and about 5 miles northeast of Russell Springs, the county's largest town. The two-story frame commercial building was constructed in 1914 in a section of Fonhill that formerly included several other commercial buildings. The resource is interpreted here as an example of an early 20th-century rural country store with a post office. It retains many exterior character-defining features, including portions of the storefront, first-floor windows, parapet roof, and painted window signage above the main entry doors. Additionally, many historic features remain inside, such as the staircase and mezzanine, decorative pressed metal wall and ceiling panels, display shelves, storage bins, oiled floors, hanging light fixtures, and post office screen and mailboxes. The area proposed for listing is .24 acres and contains one contributing building.



H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonhill Post Office Latitude: 37.082845° Longitude: -85.001467°

Setting

The H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonhill Post Office, a 1914 country store hereafter referred to as the "Store," is situated at the top of the hill on the north end of Fonhill and faces east toward KY SR 76. The Store sits on a lot about ¼ acre in size. Several resources associated with the Hollis M. Smith family are immediately adjacent: the John Hardin Smith House, a late-19th century frame single dwelling built by Hollis's father, is to the northeast; ruins of the frame c.1898 Font Hill Roller Miller (managed by Hollis's brother Egbert

¹ Primary documents from the period of significance refer to the community as both "Fonhill" and "Font Hill." Since "Fonhill" was used in the Kentucky Individual Buildings Survey Form for this resource, "Fonhill" will also be used in the narratives for this nomination. However, the syntax as it is used in primary documents will be used in citations.

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Smith) are to the southeast; and the c.1917 Egbert Smith House,² a frame 1½-story frame bungalow, is to the south.

The setting retains its rural character, and the topography consists of gently rolling hills. A grassy yard surrounds the building. A non-original wire fence with wood posts delineates the open pastures to the north and west, and an east-west gravel drive just south of the Store leads to a one-story non-historic pole barn located west of the Egbert Smith House.

A non-original concrete retaining wall is located between the Store and KY SR 76. Another non-original concrete retaining wall is located near the building's southwest corner to prevent the hill just west of the Store from sloping into the building's foundation.

Exterior Description – Summary

The two-story frame building has a rectangular footprint, an original foundation of panel-face concrete masonry units, and an end-gable standing-seam metal roof with a rubber membrane covering the west face of the parapet on the east (front) elevation. The cladding of stamped metal panels resembles the original cladding³ but was installed in 2002. Likewise, the flat wood trim that serves as corner boards and surrounds the doors and windows (except for the storefront) was installed in 2002 but mimics the original. The second-story windows were also replaced in 2002; they match the design, materials, and location of the originals. The first-story windows, however, are original.



Smith General Store, view to west, prior to collision



Smith General Store, view to south, September 2021

East (Front) Elevation

The first story of the east elevation is currently protected by a temporary frame wall covered with plastic construction wrap to protect the historic storefront and porch after a 2022 traffic accident damaged the building.

² According to an account in *The Adair County News*, the dwelling was constructed in 1917: "Egbert Smith is erecting a nice dwelling. When completed will add greatly to the appearance of our town;" see "Font Hill" news, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 10 October 1917, p. 3. However, according to Smith family oral history, the dwelling is a Sears Roebuck mail-order house that was erected in the 1930s; James T. Wilson email to the author, 17 August 2023.

³ Remnants of the original siding can be found on the sides of the awning on the east elevation. Although the original manufacturer of the original siding is unknown, it closely resembles the "Plain Brick Siding" sheets from the American Sheet and Tin Plate company. These sheets were available in black, painted, or galvanized finishes. (See "American Sheet and Tin Plate Company," *Sweet's Catalogue of Building Construction*, New York: The F.W. Dodge Co., 1914.) A black and white historic photo from c.1920 shows that the Store's cladding had a darker appearance by that time, and red streak marks on the existing foundation blocks suggest that the building had galvanized cladding that oxidized, giving the cladding a red brick-like color. See the attached c.1920 photo, available in Arnett Smith and Elsie Smith, *The William Smith Family History* (n.p., c.2000), private collection of the Smith-Wilson family, Russell County, Kentucky.

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However, portions of the original appearance of the storefront are visible behind the wall, and the historic storefront is well documented in photographs.⁴

Four non-original concrete steps lead to a full-width porch with a non-original concrete pad that sits on a foundation of concrete masonry units; the concrete block foundation under the porch is not original and was added post-c.1920. The original wood storefront features a recessed entrance flanked by paired one-over-one fixed storefront windows; however, the original windows were damaged in the 2022 accident and will be replaced in kind. The paired, original, single-light wood panel doors retain their historic wood decorative screen doors, which were not extensively damaged in the accident. The hand-painted two-light original transom reads "U.S. Post Office Font Hill. KY." A full-width quarter-round original awning covers the storefront to create the porch. The original stamped metal cladding⁵ is still attached to the north and south ends of the awning, and the standing-seam metal roofing may be original, too.

North Elevation

An original two-over-two double-hung wood window is located at the west end of the north elevation. The second story features six diamond-shaped single-light fixed wood windows with flat wood trim; the windows match the appearance and location of the original windows but were installed in 2002. The window openings are almost evenly spaced, but the westernmost window is slightly offset, reflecting the layout of rooms on the second floor.

South Elevation

The first story of the south elevation has three entries: two historic entries at the west end and a 2022 entry at the east end. The westernmost opening features an original four-panel wood door, a historic wood screen door, and flat wood trim that replaced the original in 2002. The west-central opening also retains its original four-panel wood door, a decorative wood screen door, and a single-light transom; the flat wood trim replaced the original in 2002. The opening at the east end of the south elevation was added as an alternate front entry after the storefront was damaged in 2022. Originally, the non-original concrete stairs that lead to this new opening stepped up to the front porch. The temporary door is made of OSB (oriented strand board). The metal cladding directly adjacent to the door is temporarily covered with plastic construction wrap. Solar-powered floodlights were installed above each entry in c.2022.

The second story features six diamond-shaped single-light fixed wood windows with flat wood trim. The window openings are almost evenly spaced, but the westernmost window is slightly offset, reflecting the layout of rooms on the second floor.

West (Rear) Elevation

The west elevation has an original two-over-two double-hung wood window centrally placed on the first story and a non-original diamond-shaped single-light fixed wood window centrally placed on the second story. The site slopes toward the west elevation, giving the appearance that the first-story window almost sits at ground level.

Interior – Summary

The first floor of the interior features the main sales floor, the post office area, and a storage room on the west end. A central staircase leads to a second-floor mezzanine, and the second floor also has a storage room on the west end. All interior walls and ceilings are clad in original stamped metal panels with different patterns used for the walls vs. the ceilings; the panels reflect light to help illuminate the space. The original oiled wood tongue-and-groove floors remain as well.

⁴ For example, photos of the original storefront in the Kentucky Individual Buildings Survey Form for RU-352 (October 2009), available from the Kentucky State Historic Preservation Office.

⁵ This cladding is the same cladding that originally appeared across the building's exterior.

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Interior – First Floor, Main Sales Floor and Post Office

Display cases situated on the north and south ends of the main room of the first floor create aisles between the cases and the exterior walls. The original display shelves line the north, south, and west walls, and some of the historic merchandise still sits on the shelves; the shelves are topped by bands of wide wood trim. The original glass lighting hangs from the ceiling by metal chains. Original chamfered wood posts support the second-floor mezzanine and extend to the second-floor ceiling; a hand-hewn post of unknown age is located under the south side of the mezzanine.

The original brick chimney, wrapped with stamped metal panels, extends from the center of the main room just east of the central staircase. A metal pipe extends from the chimney to a non-original heater located in the northwest corner of the main room. Although a non-original heating stove⁶ stands near the chimney, it is not in use.

The original wood post office screen extends north from the chimney. A centrally placed customer service opening is flanked by columns of brass post office boxes. An ornate brass mail slot for outgoing mail is located under the customer service window. Bands of wood trim line the top and bottom of the screen. A small historic American flag hangs from the top of the screen.

Interior – First Floor, West Room

An original four-panel wood door leads to the storage room that extends across the full width of the first floor. Original storage bins attached to the east wall were used for hardware, and bolts and nails are still stored in the bins. A wood rack near the ceiling extends between the east and west walls and was used for additional storage.

Interior – Second Floor, Mezzanine

The second-floor mezzanine is lined with an original wood railing with square balusters. At the top of the staircase, a wall of wood panels displays harnesses, horseshoes, and other equestrian merchandise sold by the H.M. Smith Store.

Interior – Second Floor, West Room

An original four-panel wood door leads to the storage room that extends across the full width of the second floor. Smith's son, H.M. Smith, Jr., used the room for an insurance office for several years; a historic flyer for the insurance business hangs on the wall in the northeast corner.

Alterations (1914-present)

Although the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office retains many of its original features, a few alterations have occurred since its construction.

The most significant alteration has been the replacement of the deteriorated exterior cladding in the spring of 2002. The Gene Smith Company removed the original cladding of metal panels and installed new metal cladding with a similar pattern.⁷ New windows were also installed in the spring of 2002; historic photos suggest that the replacements match the originals in design and materials.

On the east elevation, the porch's concrete steps, concrete pad, and concrete block foundation are not original and were added post-c.1920; historic photos show that the building historically featured wood steps that led to a wood porch with a wood railing.

⁶ The existing stove is not original; the current stove replaced the original stove (made by the Potbelly Coal Stove Company) after it got so hot that the cast iron cracked; James T. Wilson email to the author, 17 August 2023.

⁷ Remnants of the original cladding are scattered throughout the site for comparison. Historic black and white photos suggest that even in the early 20th century, the cladding had a darker appearance that resembled brick. Judging from the amount of oxidation streaks that are present on the top course of the historic foundation, it seems likely that the darker appearance was due to the oxidation of the original metal cladding.

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Several family members recall that a drive was located around the entire building, but the drive currently only extends along the south property boundary.⁸ In addition, a small storage shed was formerly located behind the Store; the building was used to store coal for the Store's heating stove.⁹ A small outhouse was located beside the coal storage building.¹⁰ Several trees were formerly located just north of the building, but they were removed in c.2015.¹¹

Historic photos show that by 1976, a Chevron sign and two gas pumps were located above the retaining wall just east of the building;¹² the sign and pumps have been removed. The retaining wall does not appear in a c.1920 historic photo but may have been added after the paving of Font Hill Road in 1939 slightly changed the topography directly east of the Store.¹³ A c.1920 photo shows that the retaining wall near the Store's southeast corner is not original as well.

The front (east) elevation of the Store was damaged in October 2022. While traveling south down KY SR 76, a trucker hauling a load of steel lost control of her vehicle and was unable to correct her course before crashing into the storefront.¹⁴ Although the front of the building was covered with plastic at the time of this nomination, portions of the original storefront are intact but damaged and in need of repairs. For instance, the storefront windows and existing porch and steps must be replaced, but the original double entry doors and transom with hand-painted sign does not need replacement.

⁸ David Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

⁹ Gene Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

¹⁰ James T. Wilson email to the author, 17 August 2023.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Font Hill origin comes with John H. Smith store," *[Russell County, KY] Times Journal Bi-Centennial Issue*, 4 July 1976, p. 32.

¹³ See George Goodman, "Fonthill Road constructed by the WPA" (1939), photo #4265, Goodman-Paxton Photographic Collection, University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections Research Center.

¹⁴ Derek Aaron, "Old Fonthill post office damaged in crash," *Laker Country News*, 5 October 2022, <https://lakercountry.com/2022/10/old-fonthill-post-office-damaged-in-crash/>.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance

COMMERCE

Period of Significance

1914-1973

Significant Dates

1914; 1964

Significant Person

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Smith brothers

Criteria Considerations

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

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Statement of Significance

Summary Paragraph

The H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office (RU 352) meets National Register Criterion A and is significant in the area of Commerce at the local level within the historic context “Country Stores with Post Offices in Russell County, Kentucky, 1914-1973.” The period of significance spans from 1914 (the year of construction) and 1973 (50 years before the year of this nomination). Significant dates include 1914 (the resource’s construction date) and 1964 (the year that the Fonthill Post Office closed). The resource is historically significant because it was the center of commerce, social activity, and postal operations in Fonthill and the adjacent rural farming communities. Furthermore, it is a good example of a southern country store with a post office from the early 20th century that reflects the commercial and social impacts these establishments had on rural agricultural communities in Russell County during the period of significance. The resource was designated as a Kentucky Landmark in 2003.

Historic Context: Country Stores with Post Offices in Russell County, KY 1914-1973

To illustrate the significance of the Smith General Store and Post Office, the narrative will first provide a brief examination of Russell County, followed by a review of country stores in the Southern United States. Then, the narrative will examine country stores in Russell County and will conclude by analyzing the historical significance of the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office within this context.

Russell County, KY during the period of significance

With the exception of some small-scale industries and limestone quarrying, Russell County’s economy was primarily agricultural until World War II.¹⁵ A few small factories existed—including a spoke factory in Fonthill that frequently closed for months at a time—but most of these early enterprises were short-lived and did not seem to have a large impact on the overall economy. In fact, according to a c.1935 analysis of Russell County, “There is no manufacturing to speak of in the County, except one woolen mill, three miles west of Jamestown, which employs about five persons. There are several sawmills which manufacture rough lumber and five flour mills. A very large percent of the people in the county obtain their living by farming.”¹⁶ Primary farming pursuits in this agricultural-based economy included corn, tobacco, oats, wheat, and livestock, according to contemporary newspaper accounts. Most local news articles from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries focused on crop news, weather reports, and other agriculture-related announcements (such as which merchants were carrying essential farming supplies).¹⁷

Moreover, community sizes in Russell County remained small throughout the twentieth century. For instance, the county’s two largest communities – Russell Springs and the county seat of Jamestown – only had populations of 500 and 410 (respectively), according to a WPA survey in 1939.¹⁸ And although southern Russell County had some access to transportation routes via the Cumberland River, northern Russell County (including Fonthill) remained relatively isolated until the road-paving WPA projects of the late 1930s.¹⁹

Still, the farming families of northern Russell County needed places to buy and sell goods. None of the communities in Russell County during the period of significance had large downtowns with resources like department stores or a variety of specialty merchants. Instead, country stores served this need, and several merchants established “stands” along roads and near crossroads.

¹⁵ Robert Rennick, “The Post Offices of Russell County, Kentucky,” *La Posta: A Journal of American Postal History* 29, no. 2 (April-May 2008), 59, available online at <http://www.lapostapub.com/Backissues/LP39-2.pdf>.

¹⁶ Works Progress Administration, “Russell County – Miscellaneous,” *County Histories of Kentucky* (N.p., 1939), available online from the *Morehead State University ScholarWorks digitized collections* at https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/kentucky_county_histories/371.

¹⁷ Russell County did not have its own newspaper until the *Russell County News* started in 1939; until that time, *The Adair County News* located the west-adjacent county reported on events in Russell County, too.

¹⁸ F. Kevin Simon, ed., *The WPA Guide to Kentucky* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1939), 287 and 431.

¹⁹ Goodman, “Fonthill Road constructed by the WPA.”

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As a result, country stores were a vital component of rural life in Russell County during the period of significance for several reasons. First, they provided a place to purchase goods. Second, they were also a place to exchange or sell goods and receive small loans in the absence of rural banks. Third, some of them served as the location of local post offices. And fourth, they provided spaces for socialization and community gathering.

Overview of Country Stores

Country stores were important and common resources in rural Southern communities during the period of significance. According to historian Brooks Blevins:

...a traveler in the rural South encountered a general mercantile every five miles or so. Most were simple establishments, combing the functions of filling stations, groceries, feed stores, hardware shops, and community centers under one roof. They were family-owned and operated, with the owners often occupying living quarters in back, upstairs, or in a house next door. Sometimes the country store was also home to the community post office, all the more reason for people to gather on the front porch or huddle around the potbellied stove inside.²⁰

In short, "the country store functioned as a grocery, clothing store, voting place, credit center, hardware business, post office, and information distribution center."²¹ Because of these various functions and their impact on rural life in the South, no institution "has played a more important role than the country store."²²

The H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office was constructed during a period in which the number of such resources was increasing throughout the agricultural southern United States, demonstrating their importance to rural communities. In fact, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Kentucky experienced a period of "institutional expansion when the schools, banks, churches, and various small industries were constructed in small towns;"²³ country stores were a part of this growth, too. Furthermore, in expanding rural areas, crossroads and budding communities were sometimes named for the country store, further illustrating their importance. For instance, in Russell County, the community of Irvin's Store was named for the general store of the same name established by J.D. Irvin, a lawyer and judge. Likewise, Webb's Crossroads (or Webb's Cross Roads) was named for the country store owned by J. A. Webb.²⁴

Furthermore, the intertwined purposes of country stores allowed them to remain open even after other businesses and industries in rural communities closed. Country stores—even though they may have been one of the few commercial ventures within an agricultural region—could survive without worrying about competition from neighboring country stores. After all, "even the most flourishing general store could not carry everything that people wanted when they wanted so many things."²⁵ Northern Russell County, for instance, had several country stores, and the merchants seemed to support each other by traveling to market days together.²⁶

However, by the end of World War II, commercial activity began to be more centralized in county seats and urbanized communities.²⁷ This shift coincided with urbanized population growth, improved rural transportation routes, and increased automobile ownership. Commercial shopping centers profited from the advent of new highway systems, luring customers from rural areas who were willing to drive several miles for lower prices and better selections at larger establishments. In Russell County, for example, several shopping centers and large

²⁰ Brooks Blevins, "The country store: In search of mercantiles and memories in the Ozarks," *South Cultures* 18, no. 4 (winter 2012), n.p.

²¹ Lowell Hayes Harrison, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 225.

²² T.D. Clark, "The Rural South as Seen in Two of Its Institutions: The Country Store and the Rural Weekly," *The Social Science Bulletin* 2, no. 5 (1949),

2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45214537>.

²³ Richard W. Stoffle, "Whither the country store," *Ethnohistory* 19, no. 1 (winter 1972), 63.

²⁴ "Webb's X Roads" news," *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 13 July 1910, p. 6.

²⁵ Gerald Carson, *The Old Country Store* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1965), 283.

²⁶ According to frequent accounts in *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]* from the first few decades of the twentieth century.

²⁷ Stoffle, "Whither the country store," 63.

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grocery stores opened in Russell Springs and Jamestown in the early 1950s. This centralization eventually led to the decline of country stores as more shoppers drove to urban commercial hubs.

But still, in their heyday, country stores were a vital part of rural life. They a) provided opportunities for commerce, b) linked rural and urban communities via retail goods, c) provided locations for local post offices, and d) provided a place for socialization and community connections.

Country stores as rural points of commerce

According to historian Thomas Clark, the number of country stores in the South increased after the Civil War because of a growing need “for an agency which could exchange small quantities of goods for equally small amounts of diverse rural produce...thus it was that the stores became...community markets for almost everything that could be sold for a profit.”²⁸ This need was especially pronounced for small-time, subsistence-based farmers like those in Russell County, who required a local establishment that could facilitate the buying and selling of goods as well as the issuance of small loans without the hassle of traveling all the way to a larger market.²⁹ Consequently, as Clark notes, “Stores of the southern countryside quickly became the heartbeat and pulse of a good portion of American business.”³⁰

Therefore, to most rural Kentuckians during the period of significance, the term “*commerce* probably meant the transaction at the local country store. Most small-scale merchants accepted produce in exchange for goods, and most of them extended credit to their trusted customers.”³¹

Country stores linked rural and urban communities via retail goods

Owners of country stores offered a wide variety of commodities, making these establishments essential to rural families. Equally important, country stores allowed rural residents to purchase goods made outside of their immediate vicinity.

Store stock was usually replenished in two ways. First, store owners were approached by traveling salesmen who passed through town – and their arrival was often announced in the local newspapers. Store owners ordered goods from these salesmen, and the goods would later be shipped to the store. Or second, store owners traveled to larger towns to attend “stock sales” or to visit the “stock markets” to purchase goods every few months.

Again, these trips were announced in the local newspapers to inform locals that new goods would soon be arriving at local country stores.

Because of their connections to larger markets, country stores allowed rural residents to participate in the modernization of America that occurred during the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As noted by historian Harvey A. Wooster writing in the 1920s, this period saw a significant transition from a time when buyers bought goods directly from craftsmen to the contemporary consumer model, where manufactured goods pass through several middlemen before finally reaching the end user.³² The availability of mass-produced goods significantly increased during this period, and country stores—via their owners who had connections to outside markets—gave rural residents access to the same goods as residents of urban areas with larger, more centralized shopping districts.

²⁸ Thomas D. Clark, *Pills, Petticoats and Plows—the Southern Country Store* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944), 28.

²⁹ Russell County had a few banks at the beginning of the period of significance, including the Bank of Jamestown that organized in 1899 and the Bank of Russell Springs (now First National Bank) which opened in 1902. [See “History,” First National Bank Russell Springs (N.d.), <https://www.fnbrs.com/aboutus/history.html> and “History,” Bank of Jamestown (N.d.), <https://www.bankofjamestown.com/history.html>.] However, the availability of improved roads was limited until the 1930s, making it difficult for rural residents to frequent a bank that was not located in their immediate vicinity.

³⁰ Clark, *Pills, Petticoats and Plows*, 32.

³¹ Harrison, *A New History of Kentucky*, 143.

³² Harvey A. Wooster, “A forgotten factor in American industrial history,” *The American Economic Review* 16, no. 1 (March 1926), 26.

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Country stores linked communities via the U.S. Postal Service

Many country stores played another vital role in rural communities as the location of the local post office. After all, before the development of the rural free delivery system in 1906, “in rural areas, mail was not delivered to an individual’s house. One had to travel to the post office to retrieve mail.”³³ Consequently, it was vital for post offices to be located in areas that were accessible to residents, ideally a convenient spot they could visit on a regular basis. Since country stores were the “centers of every sort of neighborhood activity,”³⁴ they were the ideal locations for post offices.

The U.S. Post Office began parcel service in 1913, just one year before the construction of the “new” Smith Bros. store and post office in Fonthill. With parcel service, rural customers could order goods and have them shipped to their homes. The establishment of the 1906 rural free delivery and 1913 parcel services “provided a heady taste of life for rural Americans. Soon the demand increased for the delivery of packages containing food, dry goods, drugs, and other commodities not easily available to farmers” and “spurred the growth of the great mail-order houses.”³⁵

The activities of the post office were kept separate from the store’s retail activities. For example, store owners often used screens to divide the retail and postal spaces. Individual post boxes lined these screens, and windows were provided to allow walk-up postal customers to interact with the postal workers behind the screens. Store owners (or members of their immediate family) were often designated as postmaster, too.

Country stores provided places for social interaction

Many historians have noted that country stores were oftentimes the center of social life in rural areas. That is, rural Kentuckians could interact and socialize primarily at two institutions: “at church or at the country store.”³⁶ However, many small crossroads and communities like those in rural Russell County lacked a church but had a small country store or “stand,” making these commercial ventures integral to rural society. Therefore, “In the days when men lived separate and solitary lives, it was the country store that tied the scattered farms into a community.”³⁷

Country stores provided many additional functions besides commercial and retail ones. For example, farmers would gather at country stores on the days they were unable to go into their fields. Local announcements were posted at country stores, and it was a place to hear the latest news and gossip. Rural bookmobiles stopped at country stores because they were often the only semi-public gathering space in rural areas.³⁸ Lunch counters or small delis were common, and school-children would visit the country store in the afternoons to buy candy or a soda.³⁹ Local politicians came to country stores seeking votes, and some stores also served as voting places. And country stores were sometimes one of the first buildings in rural areas to have a public-use telephone.

Country stores in Russell County

The history and context of Russell County’s historic country stores provide a better understanding of the importance of the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office. According to current research, Russell County had several country stores during the Period of Significance. They were scattered throughout

³³ Kris Applegate and Jarenda Miller, *Around Lake Cumberland* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 33.

³⁴ Clark, *Pills, Petticoats and Plows*, 32.

³⁵ *The United States Postal Service: An American History* (Washington, DC: United States Postal Service, 2022), 38, available online at (<https://about.usps.com/publications/pub100.pdf>)

³⁶ Harrison, *A New History of Kentucky*, 242.

³⁷ Carson, *The Old Country Store*, ix.

³⁸ “New bookmobile schedule given,” *Russell County [Russell Springs, KY] News*, 8 January 1959.

³⁹ Morris M. Gaskins, *My Scrapbook: A History of Russell County* (N.p., 1992), 80, available in the local history files of the Russell County Public Library, Jamestown, Kentucky.

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the county and existed at crossroads and in small villages. A review of newspapers, historic photos, and other documents from the Period of Significance illustrates the commonalities of these country stores.⁴⁰

For example, they sold similar types of general merchandise and basic farming supplies, and merchants often traveled together when they visited stock sales in larger urban markets. The country stores also served multiple functions; in addition to retail sales, they also purchased produce and small quantities of crops (like wheat) from local farmers⁴¹ and many incorporated post offices into their operations. Local historians have also noted that these country stores were the center of community life in their respective rural locations.⁴²

Most of Russell County's country stores also shared a common physical typology based on extant examples and historic photos of buildings that have been demolished. For example, as local historians note, "Russell [County] has never had the stately old buildings like those found in many Kentucky counties. Early buildings were constructed of the most plentiful material available: timber."⁴³ As such, all of Russell County's country stores were wood frame. Most were 1 or 1½ stories in height, with only the H.M. Smith Store and the demolished Irvin's Store in Creelsboro having two full stories. Furthermore, with the exception of Irvin's Store in Creelsboro,⁴⁴ most of the country stores had a gabled roof (some with parapets) and a central front entry flanked by large windows.

Furthermore, at least three country stores may have shared a common builder. Although the KY Individual Buildings Survey Form for the H.M. Smith Store (RU-352) lists the builder as the "Smith family," current research has not yielded the source for that information.⁴⁵ Furthermore, two other stores in the immediate vicinity (the demolished Webb's Crossroads store and the store at the intersection of KY SR 3525 and KY SR 910) had many similarities, suggesting that they were all built by the same but unknown builder. The buildings share similar overall massing (although the H.M. Smith Store has two stories and the others have one story), similar parapet roofs, and similar diamond-shaped second-story windows.

In addition, it seems that three individuals or families—J.D. Irvin, the Smiths, and the Rexroats—owned or operated more than one country store. The store owners often employed clerks to assist in the operation of the business as well, and it seems that clerks sometimes moved from store to store, providing additional connections between establishments. In one instance in 1917, for example, the Smith brothers hired G. K. Rexroat to serve as a clerk in the Fonthill store. Prior to this position, Rexroat clerked for the country store in Webb's Crossroads.⁴⁶

Chart of country stores known to have existed in Russell County

Although this list may not be complete due to the lack of primary materials from rural Russell County, the following information about Russell County country stores was located during the course of research for this nomination.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ See *A Pictorial History of Russell County Kentucky* (Marceline, MO: Heritage House Publishing, 1995), 102.

⁴¹ According to the local newspaper, the Smith brothers paid \$0.85/bushel for wheat in the fall of 1911. See "Fonthill" news, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 22 November 1911, p. 8.

⁴² For example, the Decatur Store and Post Office "was the center of activity of this rural community in northern Russell County at the turn of the century." See *A Pictorial History of Russell County Kentucky*, 45.

⁴³ Gaskins, *My Scrapbook*, 4.

⁴⁴ Irvin's Store in Creelsboro was a two-story frame commercial building with multiple storefronts.

⁴⁵ A seemingly thorough review of local newspapers and other primary resources did not yield the name of this builder.

⁴⁶ "Fonthill" news, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 6 March 1918, p. 4.

⁴⁷ The information in this chart was primarily gathered from articles in *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]* and Robert Rennick's research available in "The Post Offices of Russell County, Kentucky."

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Location	Name	Post Office ?	Proprietors	Dates of Operation	Extant?	Notes
Creelsboro	Irvin's Store	Yes	J.D. Irvin, William Kenneth Irving	1885-1983 ⁴⁸	No	Two-story frame building with a porch and Italianate-style cornice brackets; also had a lunch counter
Creelsboro	William Higginbottom's General Store (later the Polston Grocery)	No	William Higginbottom; Jim Al and Eliza Polston	1876 ⁴⁹ to post-1960s; ⁵⁰ re-opened in 2018 as the Campbell's Creelsboro Country Store	Yes	One-story frame building with Italianate-style cornice brackets; Building modified in 2018 with an addition and the construction of a full-width front porch and therefore has lost integrity
Decatur	Decatur Store and Post Office	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	No	One-story frame building with a full-width front porch
Denmark	Denmark Store	Yes	Edward Aaron	Late-nineteenth century to 1905 ⁵¹	No	
Eli	Dunbar Store	Yes	H. Dunbar	Pre-1912 (article in 1912)	No	
Fonthill	John Smith Store	Yes	John Smith (c.1898-1910), J.R. Luttrell and T.J. Cooper (1910-1912), Smith Brothers (Hollis M. and Egbert) (1912-1914)	c.1898-1914	No	Store was at the location of the existing H.M. Smith Store
Fonthill	Smith Bros. Store (AKA H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office)	Yes	H.M. Smith	1914-1977	Yes	Two-story frame building; Retains a high level of integrity
Hammond Store	Hammond Store	Yes	Lewis Hammond and Lewis Hammond, Jr.	Closed by 1903	No	
Helm	Helm's Store and Post Office	Yes	Henry B Hel	1905-c.1935	No	
Horse Shoe Bottom	Stokes Post Office and Store	Yes	William Neal Stoke	1890-1907	No	
Irvin's Store	Irvin's Store	Yes	Judge J.D. Irvin (original owner, died 1911), R.P. Smith ⁵² (1890s to	1876-1911	Unknown	The location of this country store was unable to be located during the course of this research.

⁴⁸ "Exploring rural Kentucky through documentary art," Kentucky Archaeological Survey (n.d.), <https://www.kentuckyarchaeologicalsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/unit-2-Irvin-Store-1920s-Directions-to-the-Artist-Irvin-Store.pdf>.

⁴⁹ "About us," Campbell Creelsboro Country Store (2023), <https://www.campbellscreeelsborocountrystore.com/>.

⁵⁰ Although the Polston Grocery is now closed, it was open at least through the 1960s. See Paul Patton, "Historic Creelsboro, KY: Polston Grocery Store," *Columbia [KY] Magazine*, 4 April 2012, available online at <http://www.columbiamagazine.com/index.php?sid=51571>.

⁵¹ "Mr. Edward Aaron, who conducted a general mercantile business at Denmark, Russell county, lost his storehouse and all its contents by fire last Monday night." See "Fire at Denmark," *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 3 May 1905, p. 1.

⁵² R.P. Smith was the brother of John H. Smith, who built the first Smith store in Fonthill.

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			1910), ⁵³ U.G. Rexroat (1910 to 1911)			
Irvin's Store	Rexroat Store	No	U.G. Rexroat and H.L. Wade	1911 to unknown	Unknown	The location of this country store was unable to be located during the course of this research.
Jabez	Jabez Store	Yes	John S. Johnson	1881-unknown	No	
Kendell	Kendell Store	Yes	James Milto Lester	1890-1912	No	One-story frame building
Kimble	Foley Store		A.R. Foley, F.L. Wilson	Pre-1900 – sold to F.L. Wilson in 1900	Unknown	
KY SR 127 and Pattie Ridge Road	Foley Store	Yes	William E. Foley	c.1900-1935	Unknown	
KY SR 3525 and KY SR 910	Unknown	Unknown	Alva and Adda Lou Gosser ⁵⁴	Unknown	Yes	Referred to as the “Green Acres Grocery” today; one-story building that resembles the H.M. Smith Store in Fonthill
New Esto	Unknown	Yes	Unknown	1920	No	
Pine Top Road near Adair County Line	Dause Store	Yes	Unknown	1926-1943	No	
Ribbon	Hadley Store and Post Office	Yes	Larkin A. Hadley	1920-1935	No	
Salem	Dallo Wilson Store	No	Dallo Wilson	1890-1946	No	A post office was located in a separate but adjacent building
Sewellton	Luke Williams Store and Sewellton Post Office	Yes	Luke Williams	1894-unknown	No	1 ½-story
Unknown	Roy's Store	Yes	Elijah Roy	1855-c.1886	Unknown	
Webb's Crossroads	Webb's Crossroads General Store and Post Office	Yes	John Webb, John A. Webb, Wilford Cunningham (1904-1929)	1872-1975	No – destroyed by fire 1975	According to historic photos, the design of this store was very similar to the 1914 H.M. Smith Store in Fonthill
Wolf Creek vicinity	McFall Store and Post Office	Yes	William B. McFall	1899-c.1935	No	

Brief history of Fonthill

The unincorporated community of Fonthill was established in the late-nineteenth century. Although the community may have been initially referred to as Leo, Samuel M. Humble opened the Fonthill Post Office on August 26, 1887.⁵⁵ The location of this post office is unknown.

Today, Fonthill includes the former H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Post Office, the ruins of the Font Hill Roller Mill (located across the street from the store and owned by the store's brother Egbert Smith), and a small handful of single dwellings. In the early twentieth century, however, the community was larger. At one

⁵³ The “Smith Brothers” refers to Hollis M. and Egbert Smith.

⁵⁴ The daughter of Alva and Adda Lou Gosser, Ruby Jean Gosser, married H.M. Smith, Jr. The Gossers resided in a dwelling that was attached to the rear of the store; James T. Wilson email to the author, 17 August 2023.

⁵⁵ *Russell County Kentucky: History and Families* (Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing Company, 1996), 55.

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time, Fonthill also had an Odd Fellows Lodge,⁵⁶ a spoke factory,⁵⁷ the Smith Motor Company⁵⁸ (a car dealership that sold Whippets and Willys-Overland vehicles located across the street from the store and owned by Hollis Smith),⁵⁹ a school, a millinery shop (operated by Beulah Rexroat Smith and located next to the Smith Motor Company), and additional dwellings.⁶⁰

Furthermore, Fonthill was historically known as a “trading center” and “was perhaps the most lively and progressive small community in Russell County,” an area that was otherwise largely agricultural.⁶¹ The H.M. Smith store was the heart of the community.

The Font Hill Road, the only road in this small community, was paved in 1939, as were many other county roads.⁶² Although these improvements gave rural residents better access to transportation routes, they also led to the centralization of goods and services in larger communities like Jamestown and Russell Springs. For example, the Fonthill Post Office closed in 1964 at the same time that other small post offices closed after a new consolidated post office opened in downtown Russell Springs.⁶³ By 1976, the store was the only business left in Fonthill.⁶⁴

Brief history of the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office

The history of the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office begins with J.H. Smith, who started a country store in Fonthill in the last few years of the nineteenth century. John H. Smith built the original Fonthill country store sometime before 1898, according to local historians.⁶⁵ The store was initially referred to as “J.H. Smith and Company...dealers in general merchandise and fine cattle and hogs.”⁶⁶ Newspaper accounts stated that the J.H. Smith and Company store had a busy business by at least 1900.⁶⁷ John H. Smith also founded the Font Hill Roller Mill in 1898, the ruins of which are located just east of the store⁶⁸ and built the single dwelling just southeast of the store.⁶⁹

The J.H. Smith store sold a variety of goods, including undertaker’s supplies.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the store also bought and sold produce and dairy. For instance, the local newspaper reported that in 1901, the “J.H. Smith and Company store in Font Hill bought and sold 10,249 dozen eggs.”⁷¹

The success of the store was, in part, due to its location. *The Adair County News* reported that “Nearly every wagon you meet is going or has been to the Font Hill Roller mills,”⁷² which was located across the street from the Smith store.

John H. Smith died in 1910. Following his death, the family sold the roller mill,⁷³ the Fonthill store, as well as the family house and farm.⁷⁴ J.R. Luttrell and T.J. Cooper purchased the Fonthill store building and its

⁵⁶ The Decatur announcements in the local newspaper stated that “The Odd Fellows will organize a society at Fonthill soon.” See *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 26 April 1905, p. 8.

⁵⁷ Announcements, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 6 May 1908, p. 2.

⁵⁸ See the advertisement for Wills-Overland, *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 23 February 1930, p. 30.

⁵⁹ David Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

⁶⁰ Goodman, “Fonthill Road constructed by the WPA.”

⁶¹ “Hollis Smith store helps tell the story,” *Russell County News [Russell Springs, KY]*, 5 April 1978, p. 4.

⁶² Goodman, “Fonthill Road constructed by the WPA.”

⁶³ *Russell County Kentucky: History and Families*, 56.

⁶⁴ L.D. Hammond, “Irvin’s Store” announcements, *Russell County News [Russell Springs, KY]*, 5 March 1964, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Gaskins, *My Scrapbook*, 221.

⁶⁶ “Premium list of the Russell Springs Fair Association,” *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 25 July 1900, p. 2.

⁶⁷ “Trade has been good doing the holiday at J.H. Smith’s store,” “Font Hill” news, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 10 January 1900,

p. 3.

⁶⁸ Gaskins, *My Scrapbook*, 223.

⁶⁹ Smith and Smith, *The William Smith Family History*, 13.

⁷⁰ Advertisement for J. H. Smith and Company, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 8 May 1901, p. 1.

⁷¹ “Local jottings,” *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 23 January 1901, p. 3.

⁷² “Irvin’s Store” news, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 16 September 1908, p. 8.

⁷³ The mill was sold “under judgement of the Court.” See “Notice, important sale,” *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 5 July 1911, p. 1.

⁷⁴ James T. Wilson email to the author, 17 August 2023.

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merchandise for 80 cents on the dollar, totaling about \$3,500. The pair planned to continue the country store, announcing in *The Adair County News* that "They will buy more goods and continue to sell at the same old stand."⁷⁵ Luttrell and Cooper ran the store for two years until 1912.⁷⁶

The Smith family, meanwhile, moved to the St. Louis area for two years. The reason for the relocation is unknown, but it seems that the Smith brothers opened a new mercantile in that city.⁷⁷ However, the Smith family moved back to Fonthill by 1912,⁷⁸ re-purchased everything they had previously sold (including the mill, the former J.H. Smith store and its stock, and the Smith family farm and house) and re-opened the country store under the Smith Brothers name.⁷⁹

Two years later, in 1914, it seems that the Smith family found the need for a new store building. Local newspaper accounts tout the success of the mercantile, so it was likely that the Smiths needed additional square footage for retail space. According to a July 1914 announcement in *The Adair County News*, "The enterprising merchants, Smith Bros., Font Hill, Russell County, have razed their old store building and are now building a new one, more commodious, on the same site;" the new 1914 building⁸⁰ continued to house the Fonthill post office as well.⁸¹ Hollis M. Smith took over the Smith Bros. store, while Egbert took over the mill.⁸² The new Smith Brothers store sold general goods, wagons, buggies, fertilizer, and undertaker's goods.⁸³ And although historic photos show that the building's signage read "Smith Bros.," historic newspapers also referred to the establishment as the Hollis M. Smith store or the H.M. Smith store. Hollis also served as the postmaster of the Fonthill post office starting in 1912 and served until 1962.⁸⁴

In 1916, Hollis married Beulah Rexroat Smith, whose family was involved in country stores in the Russell County community of Irvins Store. Like many owners of country stores, Hollis had other ventures besides the Store and operated a Black Angus cattle farm and was the President of the Russell Springs First National Bank.⁸⁵

According to local newspaper accounts and oral interviews conducted with Smith family members and Fonthill residents, the Store was an important part of daily life, even through the 1960s and 1970s. Schoolchildren stopped at the Store after school for candy or to grab an ice-cold soda from the cooler in the southwest corner of the main sales floor. Families shopped at the Store for grocery staples and other household items and stopped to make transactions at the post office. Hollis provided personal customer service and placed purchases in small paper bags (many of which are still stored on the shelves in the northwest corner of the main sales floor); he wrapped larger packages in brown paper, and the cutting table, paper dispenser, and a round metal cage used to hold twine are still located on the north side of the main sales floor.

A 1973 article from the *Russell County News* explained the importance that the Store served at the end of the Period of Significance:

⁷⁵ "Irvin's Store" news, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 28 December 1910, p. 5.

⁷⁶ Gaskins, *My Scrapbook*, 221.

⁷⁷ See a listing for a "Smith Bros." merchandise store selling furniture and other goods in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 3 January 1912, p. 19.

⁷⁸ Hollis and Egbert Smith were listed among the attendees of a social event covered in *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]* "A pleasant surprise party," *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 17 January 1912, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Gaskins, *My Scrapbook*, 221.

⁸⁰ Some sources, including the property's 2009 Kentucky Individual Buildings Survey Form, gives an estimated date of construction for the existing structure as late-nineteenth century. See Kentucky Individual Buildings Survey Form for RU-352 (October 2009), available from the Kentucky State Historic Preservation Office.

⁸¹ See the announcement in *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 15 July 1914, p. 1.

⁸² Hollis and Egbert had a third brother, Fayette, who was a rural mail carrier for the Fonthill Post Office.

⁸³ "Smith Brothers Store, Russell County, Kentucky (MSS 585)" finding aid (2008), Folklife Archives and Manuscripts, Western Kentucky University, available online at https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_mss_fin_aid/4183.

⁸⁴ "Hollis M. Smith, family history," in *Russell County, KY: History and Families*, 169.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

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[The Font Hill Rolling Mill] became vacant, but the store continued to supply a variety of needs for the community. Both the atmosphere and the merchandise in the Smith store were authentic. Only those who had been in a real country store of the 1930s or earlier could truly appreciate what Smith had preserved. The dim lighting gave the entire store a look of another day. The hard candy, boxes of old hats and other times were a priceless treasure for nostalgia buffs because the Smith store was a real going business, as it was at the turn of the century. The balcony was genuine. Shoes and work clothes and many other items were not only the right look, but the right smell and appearance for an authentic country store. The oiled floor, decorator metal walls and ceiling added just the right touch to make shopping a fascinating experience.⁸⁶

The H.M. Smith store eventually closed in 1977 for a variety of reasons. First of all, Hollis Smith decided to retire and then died in 1983. Second, the Fonthill Post Office closed after a larger post office opened in 1964 in downtown Russell Springs, giving patrons one less reason to frequent the Smith store on a regular basis.⁸⁷ Third, customers more frequently traveled to the larger communities of Jamestown or Russell Springs to shop in centralized commercial areas that offered a wider range of goods and services at better prices.⁸⁸

Since the store closed after Hollis Smith's death, the building has been used for storage, but has not served a retail function.

The resource was designated as a Kentucky Landmark in 2003.

Evaluation of the Significance of H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office within the Context "Country Stores with Post Offices in Russell County, KY 1914-1973"

After a review of other country stores in Russell County from the Period of Significance, it seems that the Smith Bros. store in Fonthill (later called the H.M. Smith store) was the largest country store in northern Russell County.⁸⁹

As noted in the chart, some of Russell County's country stores only last a few years. Oftentimes, a store or a post office was mentioned in the local newspaper on only a handful of occasions, suggesting that they closed without fanfare. Others—like Irvin's Store and the Higginbottom Store/Polston Grocery in Creelsboro, the H.M. Smith Store in Fonthill, and Webb's Crossroads General Store in Webb's Crossroads—were open for many decades and seemed to have a greater impact on the citizens of Russell County, based on the variety and frequency of news related about these stores in the local newspapers. Of these four stores, two have been demolished (Irvin's Store and Webb's Crossroads General Store) and the former Higginbottom Store/Polston Grocery was extensively altered in 2018 with an addition and the addition of a full-width front porch. Therefore, the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office is the largest historic country store that remains in Russell County. Size alone is not a measure of commercial activity or social importance or many other important roles that country stores might fulfill. However, having a greater volume than other country stores gave the Smith family an opportunity to provide a wider range of goods than their counterparts elsewhere in the county. As county residents in the 1960s and afterward began to visit larger towns for their shopping needs, country stores began to shrink in importance. As some of these closed their doors, the Smith Store and Post Office continued to serve a growing market area, enabling some shoppers to satisfy their needs without traveling to Jamestown or Russell Springs.

Over time, customers in many areas of Russell County outside of Fonthill came to the Smith Store and Post Office. Mentions about the store and its stock were found in newspaper announcements from other

⁸⁶ "Font Hill: Hollis Smith store helps tell the store," *Russell County [Russell Springs, KY] News*, 5 April 1973, p. 4.

⁸⁷ L.D. Hammond, "Irvin's Store" announcements, *Russell County News [Russell Springs, KY]*, 5 March 1964, p. 2.

⁸⁸ David Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

⁸⁹ Irvin's Store in Creelsboro in southern Russell County was larger, but the building has been demolished.

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communities like Webb's Crossroads and Irvin's Store in Russell County and Columbia, Gentry's Mill, and Gradyville in Adair County. The H.M. Smith Store was also known to specialize in equipment like undertaker's supplies, high-quality harnesses, and equestrian supplies, attracting customers from outside the region to purchase goods.

Therefore, the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office is significant within the context "Country Stores with Post Offices in Russell County, KY 1914-1973" because it is the county's best extant example of a typical Southern country store. The resource was the hub of the surrounding rural community, which was common for country stores. In addition, the Store provided farming families in the area with almost everything they needed to maintain their agrarian lifestyle, including the issuance of small loans, connections to the outside world via the Fonthill Post Office, opportunities to buy and sell agricultural products, and the ability to purchase farming supplies, essential household items, and goods from urban markets. The Store also provided a social gathering place in a rural community that had few public spaces.

Area of Significance: Commerce

The H.M. Smith Store served as a point of commerce in rural Russell County. For example, the H.M. Smith Store sold a variety of goods throughout the Period of Significance: general household goods, wagons, buggies, undertaker's goods,⁹⁰ fertilizer, and seed corn.⁹¹ A review of local newspapers from the early 20th century show that Hollis Smith attended stock sales in Louisville,⁹² Lexington, Cincinnati, and Frankfort on a seasonal basis (approximately every 3 months).⁹³ Hollis also purchased goods from traveling salesmen, who would occasionally spend the night with the Smith family in their home (the H.M. Smith House, originally constructed as the John Smith House) across the street from the Store. And if the Store didn't have an item in stock, customers could order goods from wholesale catalogs that Hollis kept on hand (notably, catalogs for Belknap of Louisville and the Sears Roebuck Company from Chicago),⁹⁴ and the goods were delivered via the Fonthill Post Office.⁹⁵

Hollis Smith also offered small loans to farmers, asking that they settle up when they sold their crops. He also allowed families to purchase goods on store credit, and again, asking that the credits be settled after crops were sold.⁹⁶ The loans were recorded in a ledger book that Hollis kept on a desk in the northwest corner of the store.⁹⁷

The Store's layout arranged goods by type. For instance, coal oil, hardware, and horseshoes were stored in the back room. The first floor had designated areas for sewing goods (cloth, patterns, and notions), candy, canned goods and grocery staples, peanuts, local eggs, Case knives, and wooden barrels of beans.⁹⁸ A small deli counter was located in the southwest corner of the first floor near the public telephone.⁹⁹ The upstairs was arranged into "departments" and sold shoes¹⁰⁰ and work clothes for men and boys.¹⁰¹ Hollis M. Smith was a lover of horses, and the Store was renowned for its selection of harnesses, and a display of harnesses with hand-written price tags is still located on the second floor. In addition, the small room at the west end of the second floor may have been used as an insurance agency office at some point.¹⁰² The Store was also the first

⁹⁰ "Font Hill origin comes with John H. Smith store."

⁹¹ Advertisement for Broadbest hybrid seed corn, *Russell County [Kentucky] News*, 15 March 1951, p. 4.

⁹² For instance, an announcement from March 1916 stated that "Hollis Smith, our efficient merchant, is in Louisville this week," "Font Hill" news, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 8 March 1916, p. 6. The "Personals" section of *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]* stated that Hollis Smith, merchant at Fonthill, was going to the Louisville market; see *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 13 March 1918, p. 1.

⁹³ "Fonthill" news, *The Adair County News [Columbia, KY]*, 11 February 1920, p. 3.

⁹⁴ James T. Wilson email to the author, 17 August 2023.

⁹⁵ Gene Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Charlene S. Harris oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

⁹⁹ David Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ "OPA Suspensions," *The Lexington [KY] Herald*, 25 February 1945, p. 20.

¹⁰¹ Charlene S. Harris oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

¹⁰² James T. Wilson oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.a

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location to sell gasoline in the northern portion of the county.¹⁰³ In short, Hollis tried to provide as many of his customers' daily needs as he could, offering almost everything a local family required to maintain a rural household.

Therefore, the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office has local significance in the area of Commerce within the context of "Country Stores with Post Offices in Russell County, KY 1914-1973" because it provides the best known example of rural commerce as it relates to historic country stores during the Period of Significance. Specifically, the Store allowed area residents to buy and sell goods and produce and obtain small loans and store credit with payment due after the sale of crops. In this way, it mirrored the operations of other twentieth-century Southern country stores.

Additional Comments

While only Commerce is claimed as an Area of Significance, the Store played an important role in terms of communications and social history for the people who lived in the area.

For instance, the H.M. Smith Store was the hub of northern Russell County and served as a gathering place where people could socialize and exchange news.¹⁰⁴ Fonthill and the surrounding rural area lack public spaces, and thereby, the Store became a gathering place, especially for male farmers who would gather at the Store on days the weather prohibited them from spending the day in their fields. According to local accounts, people would sit around the coal-burning stove (which remains intact on the first floor) and whittle.¹⁰⁵ School-children would also come to the store after school to buy a soda or candy. Therefore, the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office serves as an example of the social impact that country stores had on local residents during the period of significance.¹⁰⁶

In addition, the integration of the Fonthill Post Office with the H.M. Smith Store was typical of country stores in Russell County. Access to the postal service gave local residents access to news, mail, and goods from outside the immediate area. In Fonthill, for example, the former Egbert Smith House (south adjacent to the H.M. Smith store) was a mail-order house that was reportedly ordered through the Fonthill Post Office.¹⁰⁷

The Fonthill Post Office operated in a manner that was typical during the period of significance.¹⁰⁸ Mail was normally delivered to the Store in the morning or midafternoon. A large U.S. Postal Service truck called the Hy-Po (an abbreviation for Highway Post Office)¹⁰⁹ pulled up the driveway on the south side of the building and dropped bags of mail by the rear doors on the south elevation. Hollis Smith or one of his postal workers¹¹⁰ would bring the bags of mail to the sorting table, which is still located on the first floor just north of the central staircase. Rural carriers sorted most of the mail for rural delivery, and the Fonthill Post Office had 4-5 rural carriers¹¹¹ plus one "star" route.¹¹² Other mail customers had post office boxes at the Store; the wooden screen of post office boxes still stands just north of the central staircase. A walk-up window in the screen allowed customers to interact with the postal workers. The screen also provided a physical delineation between the

¹⁰³ The Store sold Standard Oil and Chevron gasoline. See Goodman, "Fonthill Road constructed by the WPA;" David Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ David Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Gene Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ It should be noted that the former Higginbottom's General Store (later the Polston Grocery) in Creelsboro re-opened in 2018 as the Campbell's Creelsboro Country Store. The resource currently serves as a restaurant and retail space with live entertainment. Therefore, the resource still retains its use as a local gathering space. However, several significant building alterations from 2018, including an addition that almost doubles the historic footprint and the addition of a full-width front porch, has affected the resource's historic integrity."

¹⁰⁷ Gene Smith oral interview with the author, Russell Springs, Kentucky, June 6, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Rennick, "The Post Offices of Russell County, Kentucky."

¹⁰⁹ James T. Wilson email to the author, 17 August 2023.

¹¹⁰ Although Hollis Smith served as the postmaster from 1912 to 1962, he was assisted by several postal workers.

¹¹¹ Fayette Smith, the brother of Hollis and Egbert Smith, was a rural mail carrier for the Fonthill Post Office.

¹¹² James T. Wilson email to the author, 17 August 2023.

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Store's public spaces and the private spaces of the postal workers; Hollis Smith also had a desk situated northwest of the screen.

Evaluation of the Integrity Between the Significance of the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office and its Physical Condition Today

The H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office meets National Register Criterion A, which emphasizes the property's relationship to "events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history." As such, an analysis of integrity should consider the property's physical attributes related to those events. The factors of location, setting, design, and materials are the most important factors to demonstrate a resource's historic significance; if a resource retains these integrity factors, then it also retains integrity of association as it relates to Criterion A.

The H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office retains integrity of location and setting. The Store sits on its original location and is still surrounded by several buildings associated with Fonthill and the Smith family during the Period of Significance (including the Egbert Smith House, the ruins of the Font Hill Roller Mill, and the John Smith House). Location and setting are important integrity factors to consider with country stores because the existence of other buildings associated with the Smith family and commerce in Fonthill demonstrate the close-knit relationships held by businesses and community members in this area. The location and setting also illustrate the importance of country stores being located near other businesses (like the mill across the street) and in places where community members could gather and be social, conduct business, buy goods, and engage in communications and order mail-order goods at the post office. For example, it is likely that the Egbert Smith House was even ordered from the Fonthill Post Office, showing the direct impact that the post office had on the adjacent landscape.

The Store also retains integrity of design and materials. Specifically, it retains its historic two-story form and character-defining features that are unique to country stores with post offices, including a historic storefront and painted window signage, gabled-front parapet roof on the front elevation, interior display areas illuminated by light reflecting on metal wall cladding, second floor mezzanine with areas to display merchandise, and post office screen. Throughout the interior, small details add to the depth of the integrity of the space. For example, historic flyers are posted on the shelves, and the post office screen retains a historic American flag. Small hand-written notes nailed to the walls record the price of groceries, and harnesses that remain on display on the second floor have hand-written price tags. The tables located on the second-floor mezzanine are the same tables used by Hollis M. Smith to create "departments" of merchandise.

Therefore, because the Store retains integrity of location, setting, design, and materials, it also has integrity of association, making it eligible for National Register listing under Criterion A. The existing physical fabric give today's visitors the experience of visiting an authentic country store from the Period of Significance in Russell County.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State agency
 - Federal agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository: Russell County Library, Jamestown, KY

Historic Resources Survey Number: RU-352

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.24
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

Latitude/Longitude
Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(Insert additional points as needed.)

1 37.082845° -85.001467° 3 _____

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Latitude Longitude
2 _____
Latitude Longitude

Latitude Longitude
4 _____
Latitude Longitude

or

UTM References

Datum:

NAD 1927 _____ or **NAD 1983** _____

(Insert additional UTM references as needed.)

1 _____
Zone Easting Northing

3 _____
Zone Easting Northing

2 _____
Zone Easting Northing

4 _____
Zone Easting Northing

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary includes the legal boundaries for the resource at 279 S. Hwy 76, Fonthill, KY.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the area that was historically associated with the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office. That area has integrity of setting.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Susan M. Lankford
organization R.O.A.M. Consultants date September 4, 2023
street & number 1302 Blue Jay Lane telephone 765-749-1053
city or town Henrico state VA zip code 23229
e-mail susanmlankford1@gmail.com

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Fonthill Post Office
City or Vicinity: Fonthill
County: Russell
State: Kentucky
Photographer: Susan M. Lankford (All original images are on file with Susan M. Lankford, Henrico, VA)
Date Photographed: June 2023

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0001 of 29: Site, facing south with the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Font Hill Post Office located near the center of the photograph.

0002 of 29: Egbert Smith Home (left) and east and north elevations of the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Font Hill Post Office (right), facing southwest.

0003 of 29: Egbert Smith Home (left) and the H.M. Smith General Merchandise and Font Hill Post Office (right), facing northwest.

0004 of 29: South and east elevations, facing northwest.

0005 of 29: Detail of the southeast corner of the metal awning that extends across the east elevation, facing northwest.

0006 of 29: Temporary access door on the southeast corner of the building, facing northwest.

0007 of 29: Detail of the westernmost door on the south elevation, facing north.

0008 of 29: West and south elevations, facing northeast.

0009 of 29: North and west elevations, facing southeast.

0010 of 29: Detail of the original window on the first story of the north elevation, facing south.

0011 of 29: Detail of the foundation under the building and under the porch, facing southwest.

0012 of 29: Comparison of the original vs. replacement metal cladding on the south elevation, facing north.

0013 of 29: First floor, main room, facing northwest.

0014 of 29: First floor, main sales floor, shelving along the south wall, facing west.

0015 of 29: First floor, main sales floor, shelving along the south wall, facing southeast.

0016 of 29: First floor, main sales floor, shelving along rear (west) wall, facing northwest.

0017 of 29: First floor, facing east toward the back of the post office screen.

0018 of 29: First floor, storage room on west end, facing southeast.

0019 of 29: First floor, main sales floor, staircase leading to second floor mezzanine, facing west.

0020 of 29: First floor, detail of a hand-written note nailed to a post near in the southwest corner of the main sales floor, facing southwest.

0021 of 29: First floor, detail of the original lighting, facing northwest.

0022 of 29: First floor, detail of the original front entry doors and hand-painted signage on the transom, facing east.

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0023 of 29: Second floor mezzanine, facing southeast.

0024 of 29: Second floor, room at west end, facing south.

0025 of 29: Second floor mezzanine, facing northeast.

0026 of 29: Second floor, standing near the south wall facing the top of the staircase, facing northwest.

0027 of 29: Second floor, standing at the top of the staircase, facing east.

0028 of 29: First floor, portions of original storefront, facing north.

0029 of 29: First floor, post office screen, facing northwest.