

Cleanliness next to godliness? Insights into health and hygiene from general store purchases in Lower Canada (1830-1862)



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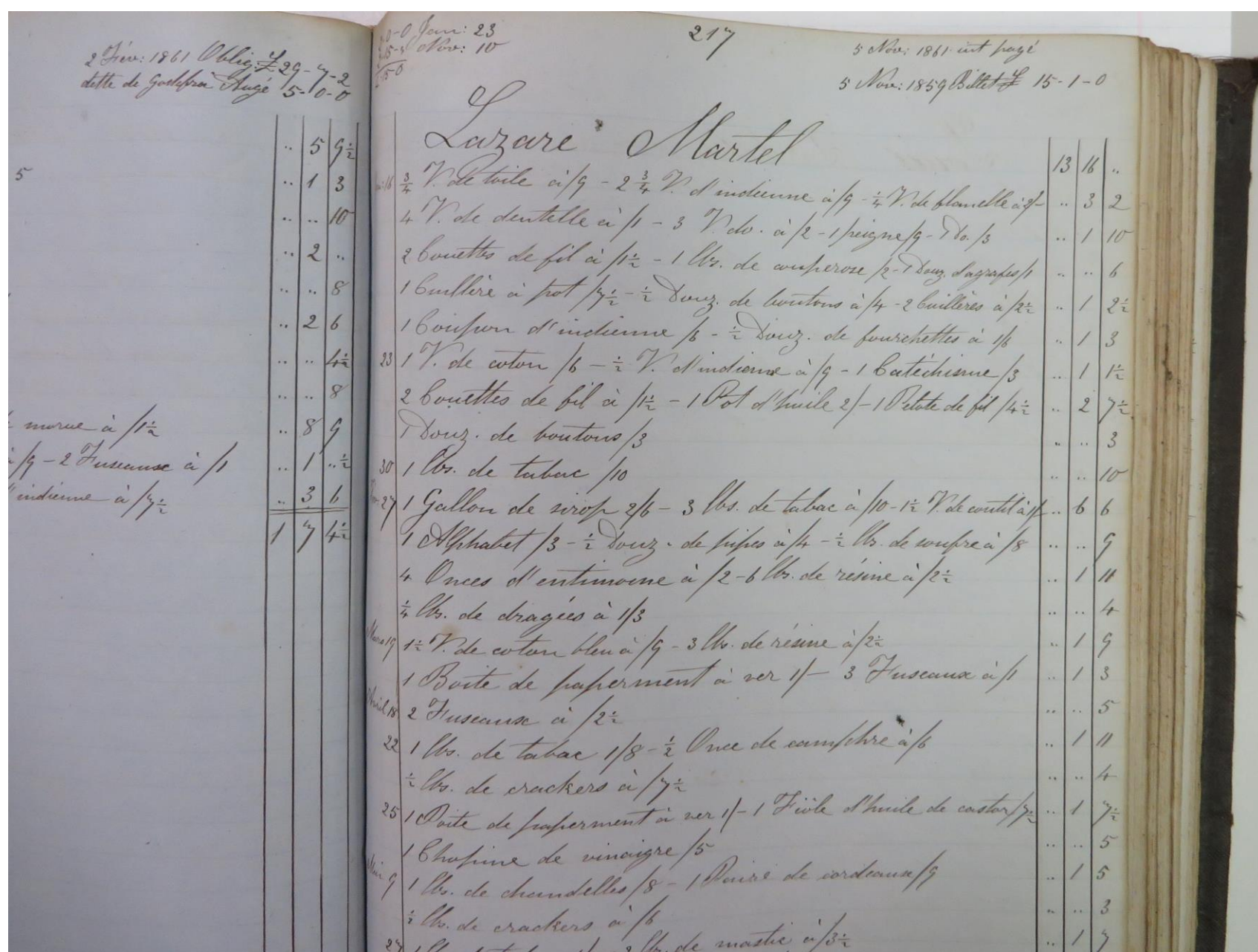


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Purpose

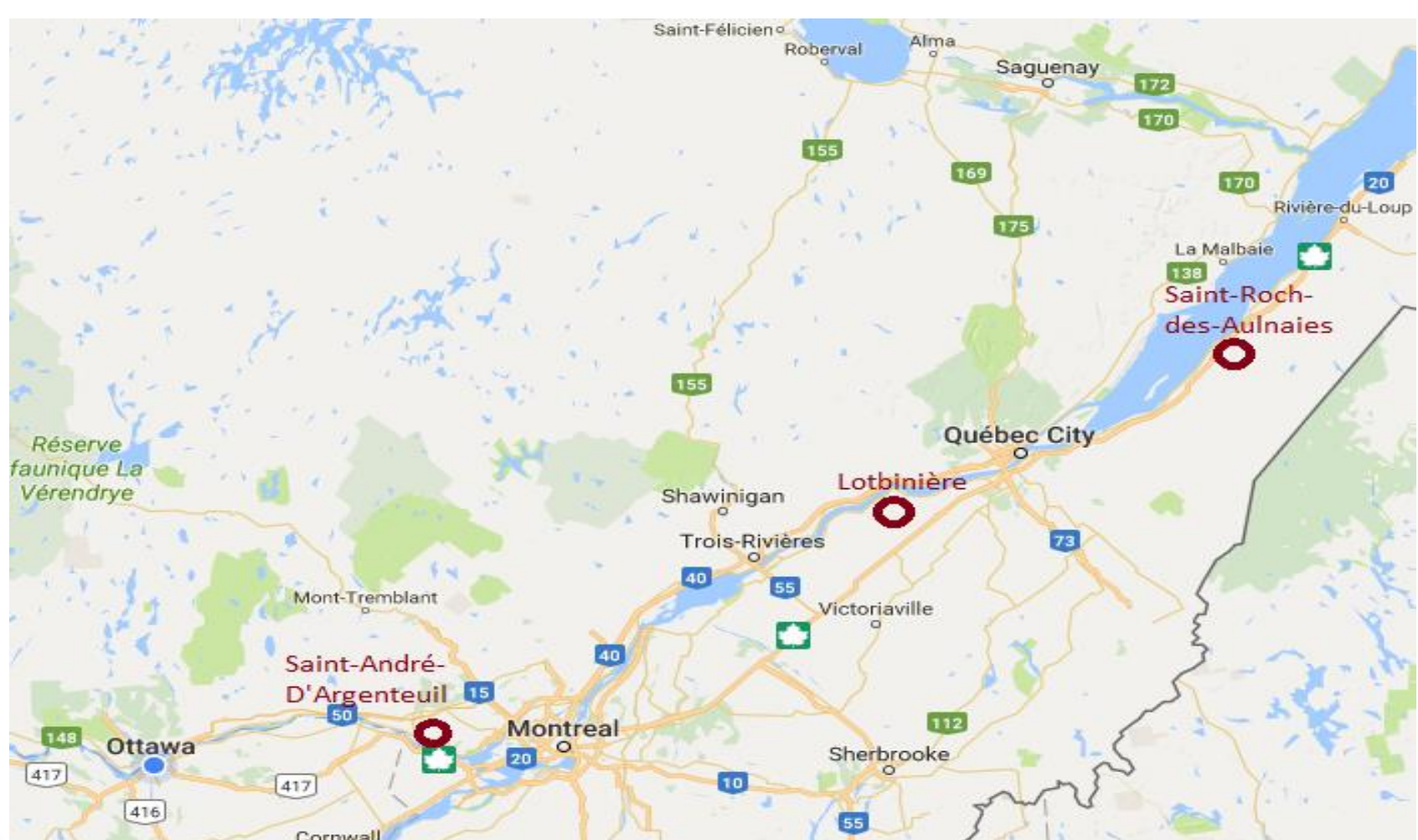
Prior to the nineteenth century, caring for one's body was understood quite differently than it is today. The connection between washed hair/body and health had not been established yet. However, the first half of the nineteenth century saw the greater spread of hygiene products from urban to rural environments. Furthermore, patent medicines began to emerge during this period, which offered a new way for people to treat themselves.



With these developments in mind, this study seeks to examine what people did to maintain health and hygiene, how it changed over time, and what their consumption habits say about rural life in early nineteenth century Lower Canada.

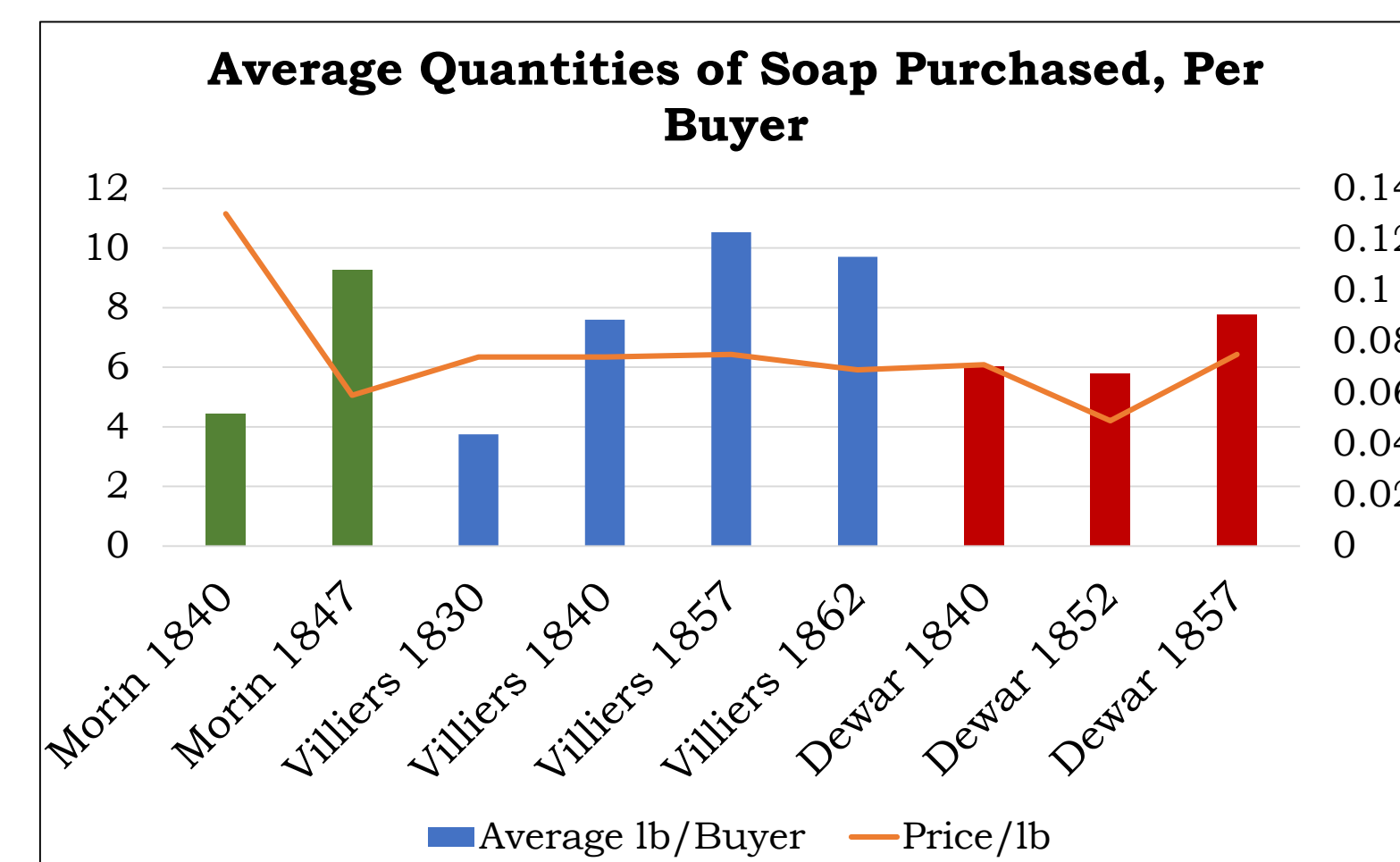
Methodology

This research project examined account books (pictured above) from four general stores in Lotbinière (De Villiers store), Argenteuil (Dewar and Blanchard & Wales stores), and St-Roch-des-Aulnaies (Morin store) between 1830 and 1862. There was one store in 1847 and 1862, two stores in 1830, 1852 and 1857, and four in 1840. Prices, amounts consumed and the percentage of products bought in relation to total purchases were analyzed. Data was entered into spreadsheets to examine changing consumption trends over time.

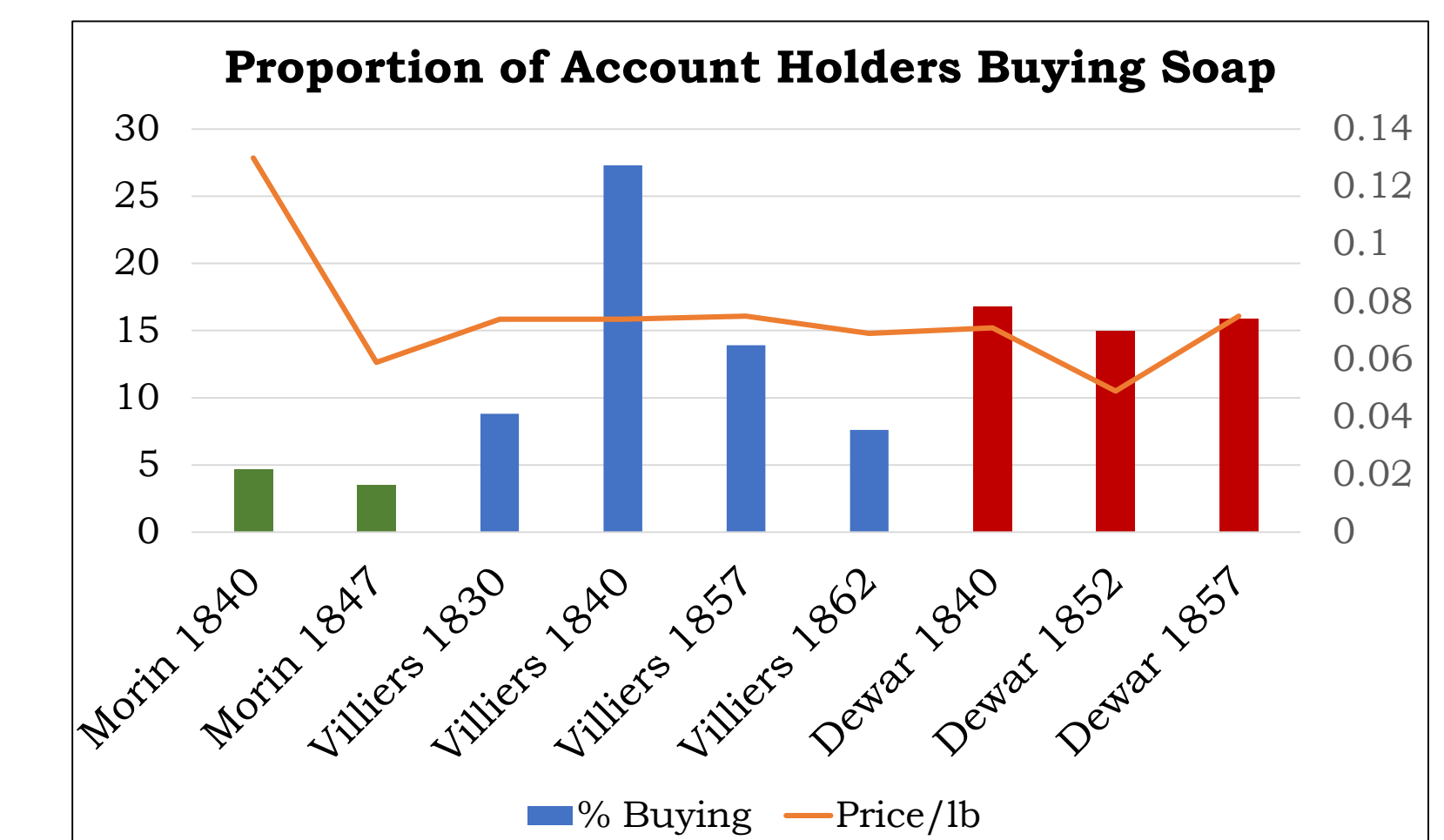


Results

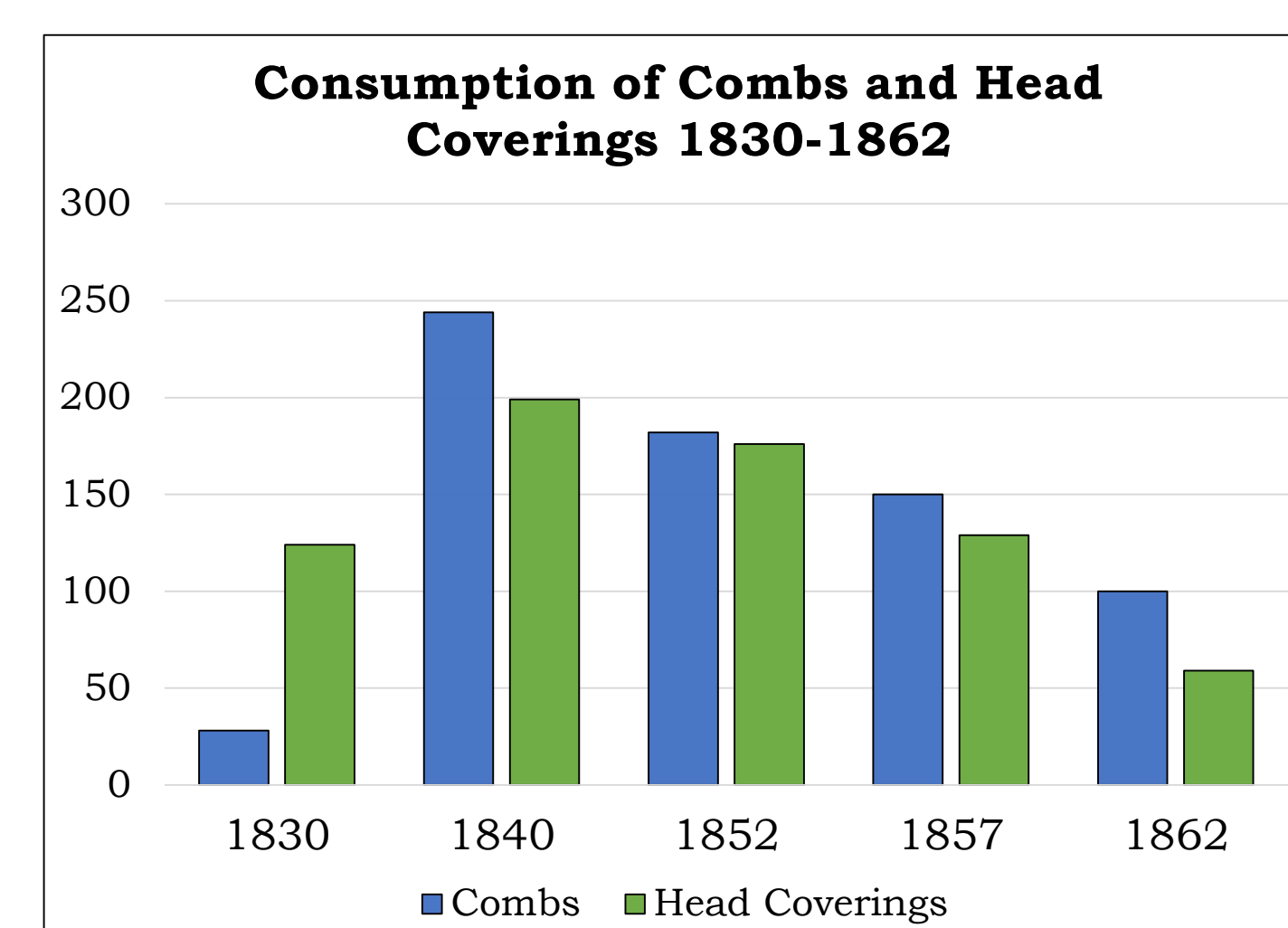
Soap



- Account holders increased their consumption of soap over time.
- A significant decrease in the price of soap at Morin's store was correlated with a large increase in the average quantity of soap purchased.
- The buying of soap at the Villiers store increased throughout the period as its price remained stable.
- Soap consumption at Dewar's store largely stayed the same when the price fell but increased along with its cost in 1857.



Hair Care



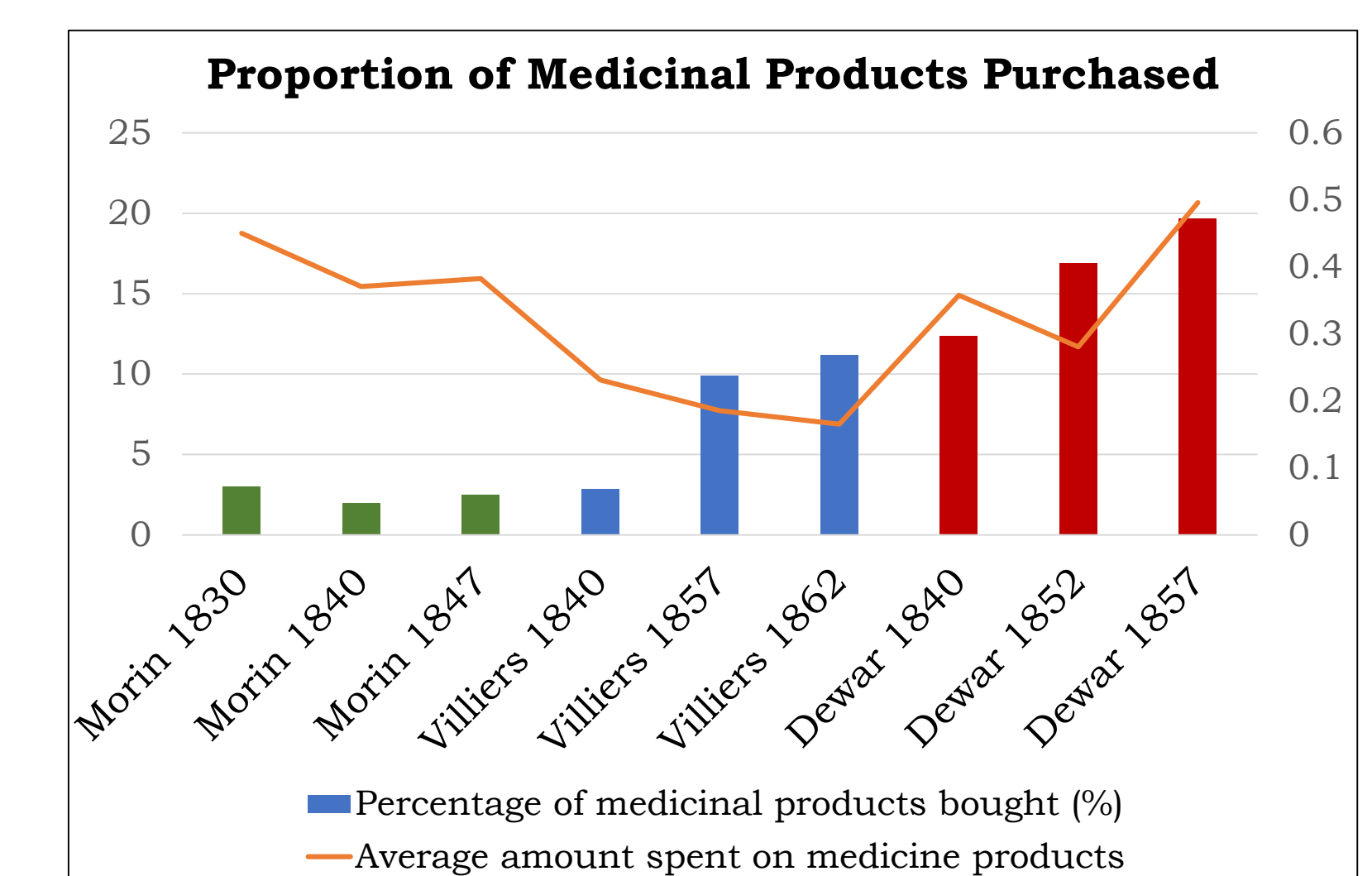
- Purchases from all four stores over the examined period indicate a greater consumption of hair combs over time.
- Account holders began to buy more hair combs than head coverings like hats and bonnets.
- General store patrons consumed hair restoring products like Balm of Columbia, a patent oil, and Bear Grease.



Medicine



- The proportion of account holders buying medicinal products increased over time.
- At Dewar's store, the average amount spent on medicinal products increased significantly with the proportion of people buying these goods.
- Laxatives like Seidlitz Powder (pictured left) were the most consumed type of medicine during the studied period.
- Broad Spectrum and "Cure all" medicines (i.e. patent medicines) were among the most purchased medicinal products during the studied period (third and fourth respectively).



Conclusions

- General stores were an important source for health and hygiene care in rural Lower Canada.
- The increase in soap purchases over time reflect a greater acceptance of its sanitary benefits.
- The price of soap influenced peoples' willingness to buy the product, rather than make it themselves.
- Greater purchases of hair combs in relation to head coverings indicates a shift in preferences among account holders.
- Increased consumption of medicinal goods over time demonstrates a greater consciousness of one's health and/or a larger variety of available goods.
- Region was an important factor influencing consumption, as medicinal purchases were greater at stores in close proximity to urban areas.
- The considerable amount of "cure all" medicinal products sold reflects a preference among customers to self-medicate.
- The large demand for laxatives suggests the inadequacy of rural diet during this time, as well as a prevalence of symptoms like constipation.

Bibliography

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