



Wilson General Store

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Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

The old country store, once a mainstay of communities throughout the United States, has become an endangered species. But the Wilson General Store is still open for business, continuing this venerable tradition. Located in Clear Spring on the National Pike, otherwise known as Route 40, it's easily accessible from I-70, just west of Hagerstown, Maryland, in a bucolic setting steeped in history. The store serves as the focal point of Wilson Village, a small community that also includes a one-room schoolhouse near the banks of Conococheague Creek.

"It's the best kept secret in Washington County," says Burma Miles, the owner of RoadRunner transport service and Antietam Tours. "Wilson's General Store is the biggest treasure in the area, like going back in time. Civil war soldiers used to stop there." Burma should know. She brings many visitors to the store and says it's a popular stop on her tours.

Rufus J. Wilson established the R.J. Wilson & Son Old Country Store in 1847 as a general store, post office, and feed store. He ran the store until he died of pneumonia in 1883. His son John continued the family business until 1919. The Martin family ran the store for the next 50 years. And then Wilson's Country Store closed in 1975.

Lewis and Francis Horst, owners of Hagerstown's Horst Milk Transfer Company, purchased the property in 1984.

Using their own funds, the Horsts restored the Wilson Village and Wilson Store with its original fixtures and merchandise. In 1996, Wilson Village was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 2012, Donny and Jenny Bowers of Middletown purchased Wilson Village. Years ago, Donny attended the one-room schoolhouse and wanted to share the Wilson Village legacy with their children.

Stepping inside is like entering a time machine into the 19th century, with sights and smells evoking a sense of nostalgia for a simpler time.

Proprietors Patty Barnhart and Bonnie Mills greet visitors from the long counter to the store's right, where they point out a multitude of memorabilia in every direction and encourage visitors to explore and ask questions. On display is the store's ledger in Rufus Wilson's handwriting.

"It was like a Walmart back then," says Patty.

A pot-belly stove near the front door offers warmth and comfort to an area near the front window where old vets





sit and swap war stories. His and hers long johns hang from the ceiling. Toward the rear of the store, an impressive oak freezer case made by Ottenheimer Brothers of Baltimore features intricately carved trim. A slide-top Coca-Cola cooler in the center of the store is filled with A-Treat sodas in a multitude of flavors.

It could take several years to explore all the merchandise. A sampling includes more than 100 jars of penny candy, numerous display cases with retro toys, gloves, and handkerchiefs, and an antique medicine chest full of tonics and old-time remedies. Patty and Bonnie are pros in cutting and wrapping exactly the right amount of block cheeses, and seasoned sausages for customers. Top sellers include candy, aged Wisconsin cheese and several flavors of homemade, hand-cut potato chips. Local honey from Blairs Valley is also popular. Hand-made crocks featuring the store name are popular and practical souvenirs.

“People love the Porter’s Salve and Rosebud Salve we sell,” says Patty. “It’s something they grew up with.”

There’s more to see beyond the store. Visitors can venture into the adjacent antique shop that was the

Above: Visitors, family and friends sit awhile and “shoot the breeze” in a welcome environment reminiscent of days gone by. Creaking old wood floors sing to the tune of the old timers and the heat of the pot belly stove.

Top right: Many items, new and old, are available on time-worn shelves and historic tip-out cabinets from early hardware stores, complete with small glass panels for content viewing. Memorabilia hangs from the ceiling, including his and hers long johns.

Right: Old fashioned penny candy jars line one side of the store – a hit with adults as well as children.





S. Dorsey Martin, Sr. and S. Dorsey Martin, Jr. managed the Old Country Store for 50 years after the death of Rufus J. Wilson. In this photo, the Martins' are celebrating 25 years in business, circa 1945.



feed store in a former life. A fireplace flanked by a sofa and chairs serves as a small parlor and refuge from sensory overload amidst an ever-changing mishmash of antiques and sundry odds and ends. A former theatre above the store is now Patty and Bonnie's gift shop, BitterSweet Memories Home Décor. Strains of old-time gospel music, sung in four-part harmony, accompany customers browsing through the shop's collection of colonial, primitive and country style furnishings and accents.

Fans of Wilson's General Store can learn what's new through the store's Facebook page. The store is open Wednesday through Saturday, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. and Sundays, 12 - 5 p.m. Bonnie's daughter Amy and her husband Mike run the store on Sundays so that Bonnie and Patty can attend church services and enjoy a day of rest.



Above: Sisters Patty Barnhart (left) and Bonnie Mills, proprietors of Wilson's General Store.

Left: At the back of store is an impressive oak freezer case (still in use) made by Ottenheimer Brothers of Baltimore.

Bottom left: The upstairs gift shop, "BitterSweet Memories Home Décor," is full of colonial, primitive and country style furnishings and accents.



**Wilson General Store – 301-582-4718
14921 Rufus Wilson Road, Clear Spring MD 21722**

From I-70, take Exit 18 – Clear Spring, MD. Turn right onto Rt. 40 and continue 4.2 miles to Wilson's General Store on the right.