

Historical Society of Cheshire County, Keene, NH

IN THE FAR PASTURE

300 Years of Agriculture in Cheshire County



Photo. by French.

S. K. STONE'S MILK FARM, KEENE, N. H.

IN THE FAR PASTURE

300 Years of Agriculture in Cheshire County,
New Hampshire



INTRODUCTION

The nature of farming in Cheshire County has changed immeasurably over the past three centuries. The transition from 18th century subsistence farms to organic farming and specialization in the 21st century is a fascinating story of hard work, geography, technology, and economics. Native Americans farmed the land here for generations before the first European settlers arrived in the 1730s. These settlers came specifically to farm the land to support their families. They cleared land all across the region, developed successful farms, and then adapted to changing conditions to survive on those farmsteads for several generations. From the subsistence farms of the 18th century, farmers eventually specialized in sheep, poultry, tobacco, dairy, organic farming, and a variety of other agricultural undertakings as the generations passed.



NATIVE AMERICAN AGRICULTURE



Native Americans cultivated land in the area that became New Hampshire for generations before European settlers arrived. Historians suggest that Native peoples relied heavily on hunting, fishing and gathering before they began to cultivate the land.



They cleared land and planted crops, as did the Europeans who came after them. These crops became a substantial part of their diet as they planted corn, squash, beans, watermelons, pumpkins, and Jerusalem artichokes. These were an important supplement to game and wild plants.



A variety of hand tools were used in the planting, maintenance and harvesting of their crops. Native Americans generally did not farm the same land for more than a few years at a time. By allowing the land to lay fallow and cultivating different areas, they did not overuse the land, thereby allowing it to replenish over time.

SUBSISTENCE FARMING

The arrival of European settlers transformed the rural landscape of New Hampshire. The early settlers and their families cleared plots of land for cultivation and pasture, creating small farms to support themselves through the year. Throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries, most of these farms were self-sufficient, subsistence farms that produced only what the families needed in order to survive. These farmers produced their own grains, fruits and vegetables, but also had livestock to produce items like eggs, milk, butter, and meat. To ensure healthy livestock, the farmers would also engage in raising grain and hay for animal feed.



SUBSISTENCE FARMING

The farm families worked long hours on these farms to ensure a successful harvest. All of this work was accomplished with hand tools, oxen and horses. Farmers worked from early spring to the autumn harvest from sunrise to sunset to produce sufficient crops to feed themselves and their livestock throughout the year. After the harvest, the families preserved what they could for winter. During the winter months the farmers cut wood to burn and repaired worn or broken tools and equipment so they were ready for the work of the next year. Their lives were centered on the farm. Subsistence farming was a year-round occupation that took the strength of the entire family to ensure its success.



THE GOLDEN AGE

Following the end of the War of 1812 the United States went through an economic transformation. The rise of the Market Revolution resulted in a shift from local to regional and national markets for goods and produce. Improved transportation systems made it possible for farmers to engage in commercial agriculture.



Cash crops grown in the river valleys and the hill towns of southwest New Hampshire were sold outside of the county. Residents of Keene in the 1830s and 1840s recalled that wagon trains of 30 to 40 wagons filled with produce rolled south through the town on their way to Massachusetts. Job Brooks of Stoddard filled his wagon with his own excess produce and that of his neighbors and took it to sell in Boston. His neighbors paid him a percentage of their profit to compensate him for his time transporting and selling their vegetables.

The sheep boom, which lasted from the 1810s to the 1830s, added considerable wealth to the farm coffers. For two generations the farms and the farm families of Cheshire County thrived. That began to change with the depletion of the soil in the hill towns, the importation of inexpensive produce from the west, and the demise of the sheep boom.

NEW ENGLAND SHEEP BOOM

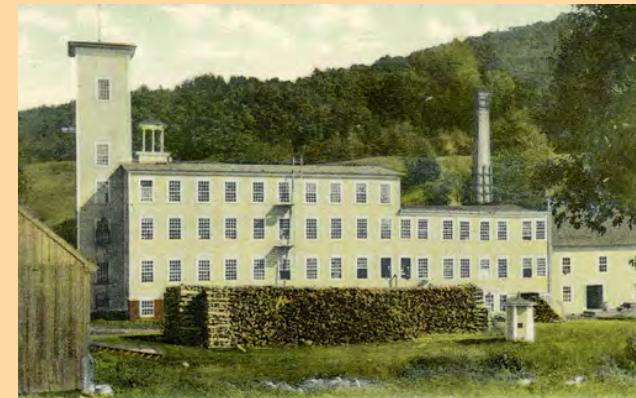


The 50 years following the Revolutionary War can be viewed as the “Golden Age” of agriculture in Cheshire County. Land was cleared, farms grew in size, and they were successful. Thousands of families moved to southwest New Hampshire, most of them to farm the land. By the 1830s probably more than 80% of the land was cleared and used for agricultural purposes.

There was enough land for everyone, the soil was productive and the sheep boom added considerably to farm income.

By 1840 the sheep boom that had resulted in an important source of income for many was beginning to decline. It was much cheaper for farmers to the west to maintain sheep herds than it was for farmers in New England. Western competition, a business depression and the loss of tariff protection combined to decrease the price of wool from 57 cents per pound to 25 cents per pound. Farmers in Cheshire County, and across central New England, could not compete with the cheap western wool and local sheep herds began to decline.

Cheshire County farm families now had a new source of income. The success of the Merinos encouraged the growth of the infant textile



industry in New England and the textile industry, in turn, encouraged the growth of the sheep herd. Sheep required a great amount of pasture land and farmers began to clear more land to pasture their sheep. In 1810 thirty percent of central New England was open agricultural land. By 1840 the area was 80 percent open. There were soon far more sheep than people in most Cheshire County towns.

FARM IMPLEMENTS

Farmers accomplished most of their farm tasks by hand through much of human history. Native American hand tools were not that different than those of the European settlers, except that they were made of stone, bone and shell rather than metal. Oxen and wheeled carts were important labor saving “equipment” on the farm by the time the settlers arrived in Cheshire County.

Pick axes, spades and hoes were used by the settlers until they could afford a plow with a wood or cast iron blade. These plows were pulled by an ox or a cow. Harvesting, storing and moving hay and grain crops also required a variety of tools. These included hand scythes, reapers and cradle scythes for cutting, hay rakes for gathering the cut grasses into piles, a variety of hay forks, and hay knives for removing the needed quantity of hay from the haymow.

Once they began to bale hay, bale hooks were used to move the bales. Farmers were familiar with many other implements for use on the farm. These ranged from flails, sheep shears, and hatchels to milk pails, milk yokes and milk skimmers.

The invention of new labor-saving hand powered equipment helped made it possible for the farm family to complete more work than they had with the earlier hand tools. The introduction of seed planters, wheeled hand harrows, winnowing machines, corn choppers, corn shellers, and improved butter churns improved the efficiency of planting, harvesting and processing agricultural products.



THE COUNTY FAIR



Since the 19th century, agricultural fairs have provided farmers with an opportunity to celebrate their agricultural achievements and enjoy a break from the day-to-day routine of the farm. With a combination of serious competition and light entertainment, annual fairs acknowledged and rewarded the hard work and skill of producers and provided a venue for rural families to socialize.

Agriculture fairs are enlivened with competitive events such cattle, horse and sheep judging, ox pulls, and produce judging. In short, fairs gave people a chance to get together and catch up on the happenings of the year, as well as to share recipes, compete for prizes and have a good time.

The Cheshire County Agricultural Society was formed in 1816, four years after the state organization was formed, and held its first fair in 1818. The 1820 fair was held on an open lot west of Main Street in Keene. There was a parade with a band, exhibits of manufactures, fancy goods and livestock, a banquet serving 130 people, and hundreds of dollars in prizes awarded.



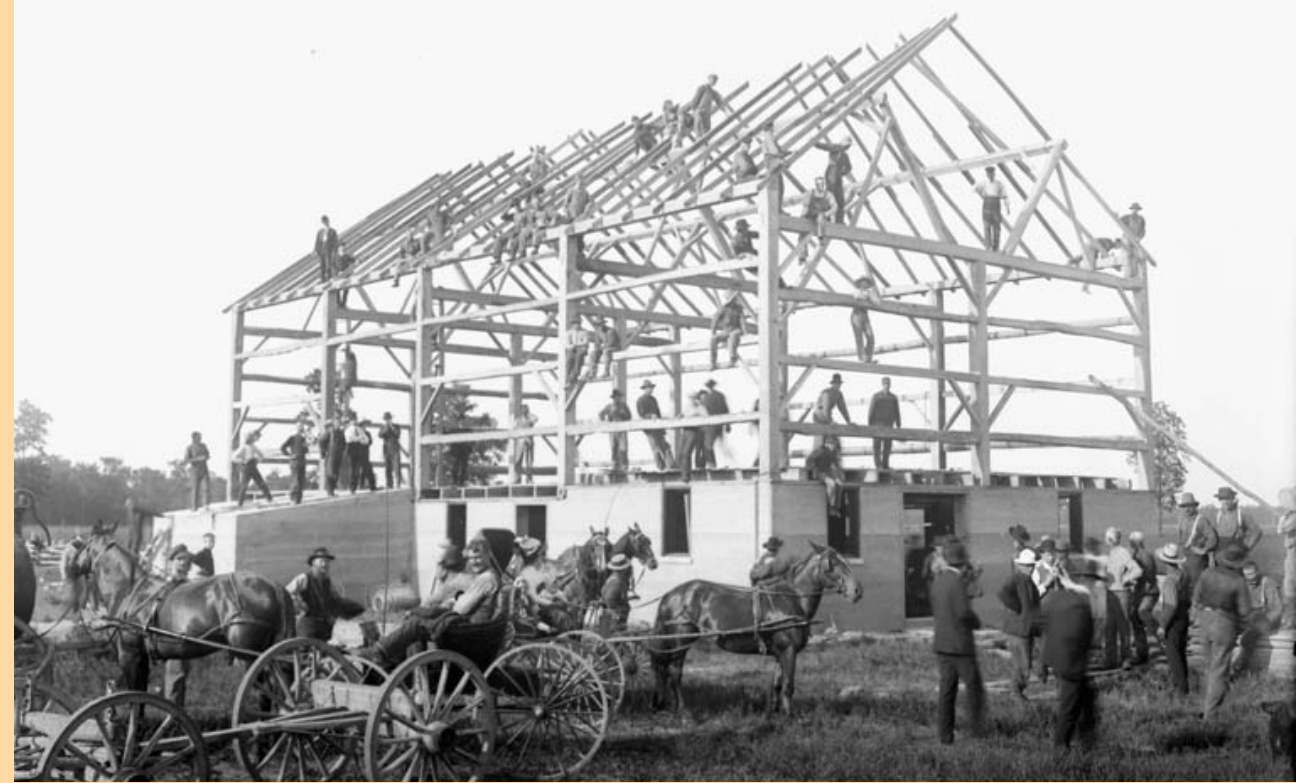
In the 1850s several local residents purchased land in West Keene to be used as a fairground. Today it is the location of Wheelock Park. The Cheshire Fair was eventually moved to its current location in Swanzey. The fair is still based on its agricultural origins, but now offers a midway and family friendly shows..

SOCIALIZING ON THE FARM

In addition to the county fair, other forms of socializing in the rural areas often related directly to life on the farm. Husking bees and barn raising bees brought together large groups of neighbors to accomplish tasks that one person could not, such as husking the corn crop or raising the post and beam framework for a barn.

The National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry was formed in 1867 as a fraternal organization to help educate farmers about sound agricultural practices. The Grange was originally devoted to educational events and social gatherings, but after the Panic of 1873, began to exert political influence as well. The Grange also held its own popular annual fairs.

Horse racing was also a popular form of entertainment in the 18th and 19th centuries. Social activities were not always formally organized, but might also occur on the spur-of-the-moment. On September 20, 1779, for example, Keene farmer Abner Sanger wrote in his diary that after he had finished raking the last of his hay, he took part in “a cow-turd frolic with Poll Washburn and Abiel French.”



Social gatherings were not just restricted to work. They were also social gatherings involving the entire family. If a young man found a red ear of corn, he earned the right to kiss a girl before dinner. Everyone helped with the work, but everyone socialized at meal time and after the day's work was completed.

DAIRY FARMING



Following the sheep craze, many farmers turned to or increased their production of dairy products. Prior to the mid-1800s there was no good method to preserve milk for long periods of time or to transport it to market quickly while it was still fresh. Consequently, most excess milk was made into butter and cheese to be sold locally; some cheese was also transported to larger markets in southern New England.



The introduction of the railroad in southwest New Hampshire revolutionized the transportation of farm produce, and especially dairy products.

Local storekeepers accepted butter in trade for store credit. The railroad allowed them to accept more butter than they could sell locally because it could be shipped to Boston within a matter of hours.



This new form of transportation also allowed the farmers of New Hampshire to help meet the demand for milk among the growing population of Boston and surrounding towns. Farmers began to add to the usual 2 or 3 cows for home milk production so that they could sell milk commercially. Herds of 40 to 50 cows were soon common as farmers specialized and the New Hampshire dairy industry was born.

THE EXODUS

Some historians have dubbed the abandonment of New England hill farms as the “Exodus.” The dictionary defines exodus as “a departure or emigration, usually of a large number of people.” That is exactly what happened in the Cheshire County from the mid-to-late 19th century.

Several factors combined to convince farmers to search for better opportunities elsewhere. The opening of the Erie Canal in the 1820s and the construction of thousands of miles of railroad lines soon after resulted in inexpensive western produce flooding the urban markets of the northeast. Local farmers could not compete economically and the wagon trains of produce from Cheshire County destined for the cities of Massachusetts and New Hampshire began to disappear. Furthermore, the thin soil in the rocky hill towns became depleted after two or three generations of supporting crops.



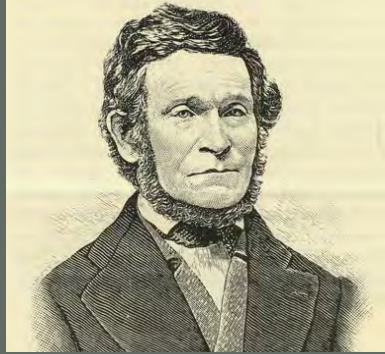
THE EXODUS

Farmers to the west also played a role in the end of the sheep boom. They could support flocks of sheep much less expensively than the farmers of New Hampshire. That combined with the easing of wool tariffs decreased the price of wool by about 50%, causing economic struggles on the hill farms of New Hampshire.

The Civil War also played a role in the exodus. The war drew thousands of farm boys from the New Hampshire hills to support the Union cause. They often saw better economic opportunities elsewhere; even if they survived the war, they often decided not to try to survive on their family's hardscrabble farm. Many never returned home again, but went west to farm or to the cities and larger towns for a job with set work hours and an hourly wage.



CATTLE DEALERS



Numerous Cheshire County farmers survived the exodus of the 19th century by specializing in the breeding and sale of cattle. Some raised and sold cattle locally and others became cattle drovers, fattening their stock in the Cheshire hills and selling them in distant markets. Chesterfield's Jay Jackson became one of the county's leading cattle dealers during the last decades of the 1800s. He kept a detailed accounting of his annual income and expenses.



In 1883 he purchased 73 head of cattle at a cost of \$2363.00 and sold 82 head for \$3799.17. When he passed away in 1893 his obituary stated that: "He had always lived upon the farm where he died (and) had the reputation of having the finest cattle in Cheshire County."

Cattle droving allowed some farmers to stay in the hill towns as others left and abandoned their farms. The old pastures on those abandoned farms still grew grass just fine and the farmland was available



very inexpensively, in some cases simply by paying the unpaid taxes. Harry Wilson and Henry Spaulding were the leading drovers in Stoddard. They would pasture 100 to 200 head of cattle in the old fields through the summer and then hire local men to help them drive the cattle to sell at the market in the fall. The last drive from Stoddard occurred in the late 1920s, partly because it became too difficult to herd 100 head of cattle through the increasing automobile traffic on the roads of New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

DAIRY INDUSTRY

The shift of population from farms to cities at the turn of the 20th century made it necessary to mass produce and improve the quality of milk. The introduction of refrigerated rail cars, cooled originally with ice, meant that milk from all over New England could be shipped to the large Hood milk plant in Boston for packaging and distribution without spoiling.

Additional technological advances allowed farmers to get more milk from their cows. The resulting competition and difficult market conditions in the 20th century resulted in some farmers increasing the size of their herds to survive while others sold their cows and left the business for economic reasons. By the 1980s the number of commercial dairy farms in Cheshire County had decreased dramatically, with the majority of the remaining farms being located in the western towns bordering on the Connecticut River.



DAIRY INDUSTRY

Significant inventions such as commercial milk bottles, milking machines, tuberculin tests for cattle, pasteurization equipment, and automatic bottling machines contributed to making milk a healthful and commercially viable product. By the 1940s the B&M Railroad ran a milk train through Cheshire County every day to collect milk from local dairy farmers. Widespread use of the Mehring milking machine in the 1890s provided a more efficient milking method for the farmer and made it possible to produce a cleaner milk product.

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POULTRY INDUSTRY



An increasing number of New England farmers turned to poultry as a source of income after the business was introduced in the mid-1800s. Cheap western grain had killed the market for New England grown grain, but the low price of imported grain meant that it was less expensive for New Englanders to raise poultry. The resulting eggs they produced found a ready market in the growing cities.

New England farmers were close to the burgeoning population and by 1880 the region's six states were the top egg producing states in the country. In 1900 New England's hens laid more than 52,000,000 dozen eggs.

The production and sale of eggs and chicken meat remained a sideline for most farmers until after WWI. Thereafter, more farmers began to specialize with some dealing exclusively in poultry. The products were highly marketable and realized high profit margins. In 1945 the value of poultry products in Cheshire County exceeded \$2 million.

The development of the broiler, a chicken bred and raised specifically for its meat, revolutionized the poultry industry.



Eventually entrepreneurs consolidated feed mill, hatchery and processing operations, resulting in the beginnings of an integrated industry. Cheshire County farmers could not compete with the rapidly growing commercial broiler industry. By 1952, specially bred meat chickens (broilers) surpassed farm chickens as the number one source of chicken meat in the United States. New England, and Cheshire County, chicken farms began to disappear.

MAPLE SUGAR & SYRUP

European settlers learned about maple sugar from the Native Americans and immediately adopted this popular sweetener for their own use. By the 1700s, Native Americans and European settlers alike were using iron and copper kettles to make syrup and sugar. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, maple sap was produced into maple sugar, a granular, solid block of maple that had a long shelf-life and could be easily transported. Maple sugar was promoted as an alternative to West Indian cane sugar.

Many Cheshire County farmers kept a sugar bush and made maple sugar for use as a sweetener. Most early producers were dairy farmers who made maple syrup and sugar during the off-season of the farm for extra income. It wasn't until the Civil War that the maple syrup industry was born, with the introduction of tin cans and the invention of metal spouts and evaporator pans. Cheshire County farms produced 214,387 pounds of maple sugar in 1870.



Technology remained largely the same for the next century until the energy crisis of the 1970s forced maple syrup producers to change their labor-intensive process. With another surge of technological breakthroughs, tubing systems were perfected, taking the sap directly from the tree to the sugarhouse. Vacuum pumps were added to the tubing systems, pre-heaters were developed to "recycle" heat lost in the steam, and reverse-osmosis filters were designed to take a portion of the water out of the sap before it was boiled. Today about 90,000 gallons of syrup is made in New Hampshire annually.

FARM TRENDS OF THE 21ST CENTURY



DIRECT TO RETAIL

Over 50,000 U.S. farms sell directly to retail outlets like stores, hospitals, restaurants, schools, and grocery stores and food coops. New Hampshire farmers rank 5th in the nation for the percentage of their direct sales that go to retail outlets. Farm networks and organizations connect locally-grown meats, vegetables, and fruits with retailers throughout the region. The Cheshire County Conservation District 'Monadnock Menus' initiative offers weekly collection and delivery of local farm fresh food to wholesale food buyers such as schools, institutions and businesses. Sales should exceed \$100,000 in 2015 with 30 farms and food producers and 31 buyers participating.



AGRITOURISM

Agritourism has become the fastest growing part of New Hampshire's agriculture scene today. One third of farm revenues come from visits to farms for the purpose of eating a meal, staying overnight, enjoying the farm environment, attending programs, or getting actively involved in farm operations.

The state's commitment to promoting agriculture as a form of tourism has led to more opportunities for local farmers. Popular agritourism experiences in the Monadnock region include pick-your-own, farm-to-table events, product tastings, Christmas tree farms, corn mazes, hayrides, agricultural fairs and festivals, bed and breakfasts, picnicking and hiking, and cross-country skiing.

FARM TRENDS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

BUY LOCAL MOVEMENT

A local food is defined as having been grown or raised within 400 miles of where it is being sold. Most consumers and retailers, however, consider local to be on a much smaller scale than its official definition. Buy Local movements began in the 1970s, in reaction to President Nixon's federal farm policy. Today, the number of opportunities for consumers to buy products from local farms has grown dramatically across the country.

Recently The Monadnock Buy Local network formed to promote the positive economic and community benefits of spending dollars locally, while supporting programs and policies that boost a local, green and fair economy. Business incubator Hannah Grimes Center supports the the movement with its agribusiness commitment, partnering with the Cheshire County Conservation District and Antioch New England College to help local farmers develop their business skills.



ORGANIC FARMING

According to the US Department of Agriculture, 3 out of 4 conventional grocery stores carry organic products. Sales of organic products account for nearly 4% of total US food sales, more than double what it was a decade ago. Some organically-grown foods are in higher demand than others including vegetables, fruits, cereals and grains.