

## Agriculture in Colebrook

The nearly settlers looked upon the tree-covered land as having practically no value, while regarding human labor as of high value. Because of this view, they sacrificed the land, as far as was necessary, in order to save labor, systematically cropping the fields on the principal of obtaining the largest results with the least expenditure, limiting improvements to what was demanded for immediate uses, and caring little about returning to the soil an equivalent of what had been depleted.

Gradually the agricultural lands were pushed further westward, and with this expansion a portion of the original farm population went with it, too restless by character and habit to find pleasure in the work of stable communities. A second portion of the inhabitants became engaged in raising, upon limited areas, such as the small, stone wall enclosed fields of Colebrook, small crops, garden vegetables and orchard fruits, and in producing butter, milk, cheese, poultry and eggs for the supply of the cities and manufacturing towns that had been built up out of the abundant profits of the primitive agriculture. Waterbury, Conn. is an example of this phenomenon. The brass industry there had its rudimentary beginnings prior to 1810, but didn't begin to take on the character of its future greatness until several social and political events took place.

One such event was the ending of the War of 1812, after which some of the technology so strictly guarded by the British authorities was brought to our side of the Atlantic, many times by smuggling highly skilled English craftsmen into this country by budding industrial communities such as the brass industry.

Another factor was the wealth of the farmers. Whereas one hundred years before, the residents of Windsor and Hartford could invest their surplus capital in the wild western lands, now new horizons presented themselves, but a major obstacle existed. The religion of the original colonists was very strict, and there was no such thing as the separation of church and state as we know it today, and the newly emerging class of manufacturers was in general not a part of the established church, which in Connecticut was the Congregational Church. Consequently, the farmers were loath to lend their money out to these "heretics", no matter what the profits and incentives were.

Movement toward moderation very slowly was taking place within the Congregational Church, and as the older members were replaced by younger, more worldly ones on the governing boards, the church evolved until in 1818 the church became disestablished and the government, industry and religion were free to go their own separate ways.

The animosity of former times became a partnership between the farmer and the town dweller, and as the shops and factories grew on their way to making this the most dynamic and powerful industrial complex the world has ever seen, the farmer reaped the benefits of an ever-increasing population, which relied upon the farmers to supply most of their food and clothing needs. Winsted, Torrington, Thomaston, Waterbury, Colebrook, Norfolk and Litchfield all became mutually dependent and mutually prosperous.

Still another portion of the agricultural community gradually became occupied in the more careful and intensive culture of the cereal crops upon better lands; poorer fields allowed to return to forest. Fertilizers began to be used; deeper plowing and better

methods of drainage were employed and thus began the serious, systematic use of agriculture in the originally settled states.

European events continued to influence the development of the United States, and of course Colebrook, being an integral part, is reflective of some of these.

In 1846 Ireland experienced a famine, primarily caused by the failure of the potato crop, a mainstay in the local diet, and in 1848 political troubles in the German states caused an unprecedented emigration to the United States of highly desirable European laborers.

Our town record books clearly reflect this. Until the 1830s, better than 90% of the family names appearing as investors or landowners were of English origin. In 1858 we find Fitzgerald, Gleason, Hurley, Green, McMahon, McInnerney and others listed as residents paying a poll tax in Colebrook, but not to be found among the names of landowners. Twenty years later many of these same names are not only land owners, but with occupations listed anywhere from farmers to paper makers and cotton spinners.

Sheep, pigs, cows (including oxen), chickens, horses, dogs and cats were the domesticated animals that accompanied settlers when they moved into new, or wild lands. The types, or breeds varied among species then as they do today. At the end of the eighteenth century, there was a sudden increase in the popularity of sheep raising. Sheep arrived in Colebrook with the first settlers, but it wasn't until 1811, when William Jarvis, the U. S. council in Lisbon, Portugal, received permission to purchase and export to the United States 200 Merino rams. Up until that time, New England had basically two different breeds of sheep, neither particularly noted for the quality of their fleece. The Merinos purchased by Jarvis were shipped to his home town of Weathersfield, Vermont, from which hub Merino blood spread throughout New England. The real value can be ascertained by studying the market value of wool. In Vermont in 1812, a fleece averaged out at 6 % of the animal's live weight. By 1844, it was 15 %, and by the end of the Civil War, 21%.

Something peculiar took place in Colebrook around the year 1812 in regard to raising sheep. The rate books, or tax ledgers listing every taxable item in town, were kept each year. Not all have survived, but enough still exist to give the modern researcher an insight as to the workings of the town. Prior to 1812, and after the 1820s, each farm animal was assigned a value so that the rate-maker could arrive at a figure and the taxes for the coming year could be set. On average, a cow was assigned the figure of \$7.00, a horse \$10.00, an ox \$10.00 and a sheep 75cents, but not in 1812; that year there were 1,867 sheep in town, but when it came to Merinos, not one person had more than 20, and the assigned value of .75 cents each was deducted from the owner's total tax rate. This is unprecedented in Colebrook's tax history. It appears that someone imported merino sheep into town and convinced the town fathers to give a tax break to all those who agreed to join in the experiment. This experiment seems to have lasted for only about two or three years, as the 1815 tax ledger does not indicate any tax credit for merino sheep. We do not have records for 1813 and 1814. My guess is that someone in Colebrook was acquainted with William Jarvis, the U. S. diplomat in Portugal, as it is difficult to justify the large number of Merino sheep being sent to the small and relatively insignificant farming town of Colebrook, Connecticut.