

Commodity Values in Early Colonial New England

All beginnings of the various aspects of life in the new world began with two things: what the colonists knew or believed and what physical items they brought with them in the small ships of the day. Many, if not most ships carried as part of their cargo cows, sheep, pigs and chickens as well as a few horses. The attrition rate for the larger animals was very high, whereas poultry were more easily brought over, and they multiplied more rapidly, but it was a good many years after the landing at Plymouth before cows and sheep became plentiful.

The best way we have to determine the value of an item is to review old wills or official inventories ordered by the community upon the death of a landed citizen. In the case of a will, comparisons can be made between the values of items left to a man's children. In England, and to a certain respect in the English colonies such as those in New England, a man's oldest son inherited his father's estate, with a distribution of lesser value to the other children. For example, after the bequeath to the eldest son, the amount of 1000 pounds sterling could be given each of four younger sons, with each of his daughters receiving 200 pounds sterling, a cow, a heifer, ten sheep and a feather-bed.

That statement to most of today's Americans is meaningless unless the monetary terms are defined. The colonists used the British monetary system that consisted of pounds, shillings and pence. The term "pound sterling", usually expressed simply as "pound", defined the unit expressed in silver. Think of a pound the same as you would think of the basic unit of our money as a dollar. The pound consisted of 20 shillings and the shilling contained 12 pence. A penny also could be divided into half (pronounced "hape-ney", or into quarters, called farthings, but we don't need to know that right now.) Quite often, especially in the colonies, actual money never entered into a financial transaction, instead the value would be agreed upon as being worth so many shillings. Each town annually elected men called listers who established the value that each commodity deemed valuable enough to be used in lieu of currency was to be worth that fiscal year. It might be established, for example, that wheat was worth 10 shillings per bushel, oats 8 shillings and flax 1 shilling per pound. Items so calibrated could then be used to pay taxes and the minister's salary. Old ledgers are also full of entries such as "one pair of shoes equal to one and one-half bushels of wheat".

To further complicate matters, the value of the pound fluctuated as to its worth depending upon what time period you are dealing with. However, for simplicity's sake, let's assign a value of \$5.00 for one pound. That means one shilling (there are 20 in a pound) would have the value of .25 cents. Indeed, a silver shilling is just about the size and weight of one US quarter. There was a coin worth one half of a shilling, called a sixpence, which was worth twelve and a half cents. With this information, you should be able to have a fairly good idea of the values given for colonial currency.

Connecticut's Governor Trumbull wrote a history of the state in which he states that the value of a good milch cow in 1640 was 30 pounds. (\$150.00) At the same date carpenters and other mechanics were receiving from 14 to 18 pence per day. (27 to 37.5 cents). A man's workday consisted of the period "from kin see to kan't see", or in other words, from dawn to dusk, but the workday for oxen was only six hours. This tradition began in the early years of colonization when cattle were still being transported across the Atlantic from England. Cattle formed the deck load of nearly all incoming ships in

summer, but not more than 25% were expected to survive, even under exceptionally favorable conditions, consequently great care was taken with their health and well-being.

Until the first half of the nineteenth century, all able-bodied landowners were required to spend time (usually three days) each spring and fall working on town roads, for which his taxes were reduced proportionate to the value of his work. An interesting comparison between the British and the newly-emerging American monetary systems can be made by the wages paid for work on town highways in 1795, when some calibrations were still being made using the old method and 1797, when the decimal system, official since 1787, began to be used in local ledgers. In 1795 a man was paid 4 shillings 6 pence in the spring and 3 shillings 6 pence in the fall. (The mud season presented more difficult working conditions, hence the higher wage.) A man bringing a yoke of oxen was paid one half of whatever his wage was for them. In 1797 the price of labor in the spring was .75 cents per day in the spring, .58 cents in the fall.

As you will observe, the rule I just told you of whereby a shilling was worth roughly .25 cents doesn't apply here, rather it appears to be worth sixteen and one half cents to the shilling. Two things could be responsible for this – either Litchfield County set their own value on a British shilling, or perhaps they based its worth on Connecticut currency, also founded upon the British system of pounds, shillings and pence, but with far less actual value.

For simplicities sake, let's assume that a man averaged 4 shillings per day in the 1790's. We then see that food prices were very dear compared to ours today. Here are Litchfield County commodity prices for that same decade: wheat - 5 shillings per bushel, rye – 3 shillings 3 pence, Indian corn – 2 shillings 9 pence, buckwheat – 1 shilling 9 pence, oats – 1 shilling 4 pence, flax – 6 pence per lb., butter – 8 pence per lb., cheese – 4 pence per lb.

At this rate, a worker then would have had to work one and one-quarter days just to purchase one bushel of wheat. Here are actual prices as listed on the Chicago Board of Trade for wheat and corn for June 30, 1994: corn was \$2.40 a bushel; wheat was \$3.15 per bushel. Even with our minimum wage earnings these days, a worker would need to work less than one hour to make these purchases.

This is why it is so important to find out how long a worker needed to labor in order to purchase an object in days gone by before a value can be established for that item.

Historic Bytes

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