Farming in the Colonies

Excerpts Taken from History Central, Arlington Historical Society, Explore History, and Journal of the American Revolution.

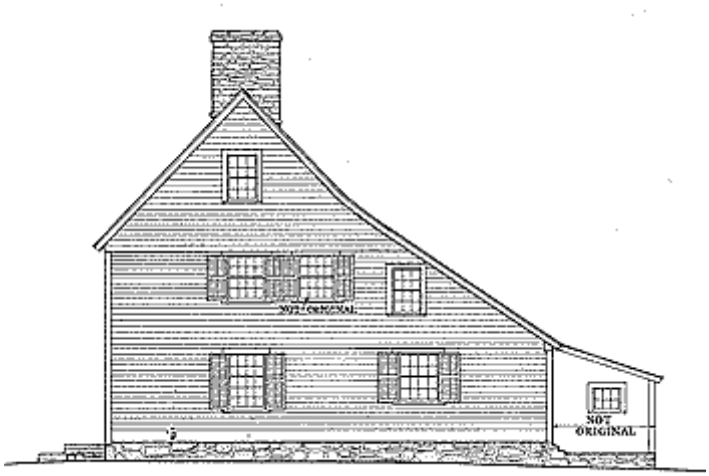
New England Colonies

The land in New England was poor and difficult to farm. The farmers in New England had to first clear stones from their fields before they could begin to farm. Those stones can be seen today. The poor soil made farming difficult. The growing season was short; there was only enough time to plant one crop such as corn. Most farmers could do no more than what is called subsistence farming. That meant that farmers could produce only enough for them to eat and live on. Initially, farmhouses were one large room in which the family would cook, live, and sleep. As time went on, slowly, these houses were slowly expanded.

Fishing was very important to New England. Fishing fleets sailed regularly from New England coastal cities for the major fishing grounds off the coast. The fishermen were able to catch enough fish to sell to other colonies. They were able to package enough dried or salted fish to export to Europe and the West Indies. Some New Englanders also became whalers, as they hunted for their valuable oil. New Englanders also benefited from a rich forest that covered much of New England. The forest provided a fertile source for hunting, as well as a source for wood. The wood was used to build the homes of New England. The forests also became the source of one of the most important New England industries--shipbuilding.

A step down from the gentry, the middle class consisted of smaller farmers and artisans and was the backbone of the colonies. This class contained the largest portion of the population and used titles such as “Farmer,” “Husbandman,” and “Yeoman.”

In New England, society centered on the township, which consisted of approximately twenty families and a minister. During the earliest period of British colonization, towns had public squares that served as the focal spaces for the townspeople, with their farms spreading out from the center of town. Most Massachusetts Bay Colony families were farmers who settled vast swaths of chartered land.



Drawing of a salt-box house (Comfort Starr House located in Guilford, CT) illustrating the distinctive roof line

Farms in early America were no more than 250 acres. Anything exceeding that measure made it difficult for single families to cultivate. It is a common misconception that early American farmers were self-sufficient: growing all their own food, weaving their own cloth and mending their own tools. This lifestyle was indicative of a small population of settlers (no more than 2%) on the frontier. The average colonist bought most manufactured goods from England and local artisans in the community were responsible for repairs. Farms differed from region to region in the colonies. In New England, low stone walls and fences served to mark the farms' borders.

Colonists used to cultivate crops according to the style they learned from the local Native American population: piling up dirt and planting crops such as corn, beans and squash in the same mound, in order to prevent weeds from growing. They also fertilized their crops by burying fish in each mound. In addition to crops, farming families would raise a fair amount of fowl, such as pigeons (squab), chickens, guinea hens, Cornish hens and ducks. These domesticated animals were kept in fenced-in yards in order to determine who owned them. Horses and cattle were vital to New England farms. Horses were the chief mode of transportation, and pulled wagons and plows. Farmers used cattle more for meat than dairy. Their diets were meager, and, like horses, they foraged

for much of their food. Oxen were cattle that farmers trained for work. They were cheaper to acquire and care for than horses, they pulled heavier loads, and were eaten.

The average age of marriage in New England in the late 17th century was 27 for men and 22-23 for women. In colonial New England, people could not marry until they came of age (18 for women; 21 for men). Parents essentially “owned” their children’s labor until then and relied on them to help run the farm and household. After coming of age, both men and women needed time to accumulate property and income to support a family.

Middle Colonies

The Middle colonies had rich soil and a good climate for growing crops. As a result, they were able to produce more food than they could consume. As a result they were able to export wheat and other grains to Europe. The middle colonies became known as "the breadbasket colonies". Farmers would ship their goods to the large port cities of New York and Philadelphia. Many farmers lived along the Hudson and Delaware Rivers, or other large waterways, which made shipments possible.

Farmers in Pennsylvania called it "a farmer's heaven," "the best poor man's country," "the breadbasket of America," and a place where servants could become rich men. Blessed with a mild climate, plentiful rainfall, and rich soils, southeastern Pennsylvania was ideal for farming.

For centuries Native Americans had grown nutritious gardens of corn, squash, beans, and other vegetables. Although the temperatures and weather were more varied than those in Europe, the conditions were similar enough to be very hospitable for most Old World grains, fruits, and livestock.

Drawn by the promise of religious freedom and economic opportunity, Quakers from the British Isles, German Lutherans, pietists, Scots-Irish Presbyterians, and others poured into the colony and pushed deeper and deeper into Indian lands.

From the 1720s until the 1840s, Pennsylvania led the colonies and then the states in the production of food. Sown in immense quantities, wheat quickly became "the grand article of the province." The great wheat fields supported a flourishing flour milling industry along streams that provided the waterpower for gristmills. Pennsylvania farmers grew a huge variety of crops, and created many processed products as well; everything from flax seed to cowhides left Pennsylvania farm gates, much of it for use nearby. Its ties to commercial networks in Philadelphia and Baltimore that linked to markets in Europe and the West Indies made colonial Pennsylvania major exporter of agricultural and forest products to the West Indies, Europe, and markets across the globe.

Land was abundant in Pennsylvania. For more than a century many of its farmers mined the soil, drawing out its nutrients to grow their crops, then cleared more acres to keep up overall production, or moved on to new ground as the yields decreased. Driven onwards by the desire for untilled land, generation after generation of tough, hardscrabble farmers moved the Pennsylvania frontier westward, cutting down millions of acres of primeval forest they replaced with family farms.

Southern Colonies

The farmers in the south were divided into two groups: There were owners of large farms and plantation, who owned hundreds of acres of land. There were also small farmers, who had small farms often not even owning the land they worked. Tobacco, rice and indigo were the main crops grown in the southern colonies . All of these were cash crops, sold for money. The crops were usually exported from the colony. The production of these crops required large numbers of workers. As a result, the plantations in the south relied on slaves to do much of the work on their farms.

From the very beginning the key to prosperity for the Southern colonist was the near universal opportunity to acquire land. Land was the source and measure of wealth in the world at that time. A tobacco planter wrote, “If a man has Money, Negros and Land enough he is a complete Gentleman.” And land was abundant. In Jamestown the investors in the parent London Company were given 100 acres for each share of stock they owned. Around Charles Town, South Carolina in the late seventeenth century, land was valued at only one penny per acre. Thus, the acquisition of land was not the issue. The more critical issue of the colonial period was not how to obtain land; it was how to obtain adequate labor to work the land.

The majority of the Southern colonial farms were sized at between 75 to 125 acres, and were worked by the immediate family. With hard work and some money for tools to clear the forests into arable land, a family could provide an adequate diet. Developing large farms was difficult when one considers that it took a farmer a month to clear around 3 acres if he left the tree stumps in the ground. Although this was a backbreaking way to exist, it represented up to 75 percent of the livelihood of the population of colonists. The typical Southern small farmer planted corn, wheat, barley, oats, and rye and a variety of vegetables in season on 15 to 35 acres of his farm, leaving the rest of the acreage to forest or pasture. He raised livestock cattle and hogs for meat, and cows for hides and dairy products. Horses were used for transportation and for working the fields. Sheep were raised for wool. Some farms had a small orchard for growing fruits.

Overall the living standards of the typical white family were the highest in the world in the mid-1700s. Land was readily available, the population density was low, the air and water was not polluted, food was plentiful, disease was low, abject poverty was rare, energy was abundant, and the environment was essentially untouched and beautiful. The struggles to survive, as in the early colonial period, were mostly a past concern for the majority of the population. A study on Maryland’s Eastern Shore found that a typical household spent one quarter of their income for products that came from outside their colony of residence. This was a significant finding, and a real indicator of a high level of economic activity for the eighteenth century in North America.

The sure sign of the well being of the colonists were their diets. The typical family spent a third of their income on food such as grains and vegetables. The high meat consumption was a key indicator of their relative wealth. The colonists had high quantities of pork and dairy products, with the average adult consuming about 1/2 pound of meat per day. Hard evidence of the impact of good nutritional diets in the American colonies was based on the muster rolls of soldiers in the French and Indian

War and the American Revolution on both sides. Studies found that native-born colonial soldiers were two inches taller than the British soldiers, a clear scientific indicator of the superior diets of the North American colonists.

Questions for New England

1. What made farming in the New England Colonies harder than in the Middle or Southern ones?

2. What type of farmers were most of them in New England? Why?

3. What were two of the industries important in New England?

4. Where did New Englanders learn their style of farming from?

5. What was the average age of marriage in the New England colonies?

Questions for Middle Colonies

1. Why were the Middle Colonies known as the breadbasket colonies?

2. What colony led them in the production of food? What conditions made farming favorable there?

3. What was the leading crop in this region?

Questions for Southern Colonies

1. What 2 groups were farmers divided into in the South?

2. What were the main crops grown in the South?

3. What resource was the key to prosperity for southern colonists?

4. What standard of living did southern colonial farmers experience compared to their European brethren? What factors led to this existence?