

Farming in Coventry by Bill Jobbagy March 2008

Coventry was settled in the very early 1700's and incorporated as a town in 1712. Between 1708 and 1731, the town fathers allocated homelots sized between 10 and 100 acres, beginning to the north and east of the lake, continuing at the north and west side of town and finishing in the south and east. By 1731 there were several hundred "homelots" that by necessity were also farms. The first roads were South Street and Cross Street, followed by Main Street and the "Old Connecticut Path" roughly today's Route 44.

Early residents first settled on what grasslands they found for their cattle and began chopping down trees (for timber and cooking and heating) and removing rocks to plant crops. Oxen were the prevalent work animals. Much of the land in Coventry had been burned frequently by the Indians to provide clear paths for their arrows and to keep down the flies. It was said that when the settlers arrived, an ox cart could be driven over most of the land in Coventry with only saplings to drive through. Residents allocated their property for the following purposes: a small portion for the homestead and barn and vegetable garden, pasture for grazing livestock, grain fields and a wood lot.

Indian corn was the preferred first crop as the field required no plowing, hoeing or manure. Ashes from cleared land provided some fertilization. One man could plant one acre per day. Within each hill of corn was often planted squash or bean seeds. Squash grew among the corn and beans climbed the stalks. After the first few years, wheat or oats, vegetables, herbs, leeks, melon, gourds, radishes, cabbage, peas and asparagus could be planted. Rye was used to make beer and oats were used for animal feed. Swine and cattle dominated the livestock; little horse breeding was done locally. No fowl were raised as wild turkey, duck and chickens were plentiful. Sheep were not practical at first due to the prevalence of wolves.

Plowland, meadow and pasture profited the farmer only when fenced to keep animals out of the crops and out of the meadow until harvest or mowing. Animals must be fenced in cleared or semi-cleared pastures. Fencing was chiefly made of rails 12 feet long of chestnut and some ash or oak. When wood became scarce, stone replaced rails (usually topped with a wood fencing). Original stone walls were just the collection of stone moved to the edges of pasture and crop land. The only mechanized assistance available to Coventry residents in the 1700's were grist, saw and fulling mills powered by water wheels and cider presses powered by water or horses and oxen.

In the 1740's farms began producing a surplus of goods and commercial farming began in eastern Connecticut. There was a vast market in the West Indies for livestock, packed meats, flour and cheese. In return farmers received bills of exchange, molasses, sugar and rum. Most of the goods shipped to and from Coventry came through Norwich.

Until the late 1700's, folks were generally subsistence farmers, consuming pea or bean porridge or broth from boiled salt meat mixed with meal and sometimes hasty pudding (flour or oatmeal in seasoned or sweetened water or milk and quickly cooked) and milk. The common bread was made from Indian cornmeal or rye flour. Early farmer's tools included the plow, hoe, pitchfork, shovel and cart or harrow, mostly made of wood though sometimes a blacksmith would plate them with strips of sheet iron.

Early deeds and historical records mention several orchards in the North Society. Ebenezer Stiles and Gad Hunt owned farms of at least 100 acres on Broadway just west of the Skungamaug, which held thriving apple orchards in 1740's and for some time later. Nathaniel Root's (Boston Turnpike and North River Road) property contained an orchard in 1809. There were hundreds of acres of apple orchards in town in the 1700's and 1800's. Most all were cultivated by local farmers using seeds from Massachusetts and Rhode Island farms whose seeds originated in England in the 1600's. Apple cider provided the most prevalent source of liquid refreshment for more than 100 years.

During the Revolutionary War, Coventry farms provided food and blankets to soldiers and provisioned the army with large amounts of hogs and cider. Jeremiah Ripley (Ripley Hill Road) was a provisioning agent for the army. Cider was not the sweet cider of nowadays, but a fermented alcoholic beverage.

By the 1780's the soil was nearly exhausted, as crop rotation and fertilization were not used extensively. Farmers, particularly the younger ones, began migrating first to upper New England and then to the midwest where land was inexpensive and more fertile. The remaining farmers began to concentrate more on a livestock based (meat and dairy) enterprise rather than crop based, and learned to employ crop rotation and the use of fertilizers.

Thomas Porter's (South Street) account book from 1787-1812 provides a glimpse of the activity on a typical large farm. Wood, vinegar, turnips, potatoes, pork, veal, cheese, butter, tallow, apples, quinces, corn, oats, hay, rye, beans, and a variety of cloth including shirting, white linen, and silk are indicated in the account book. Often rented were oxen and horses; labors included dressing flax and cradling rye. Thomas bought rum, tea, and earthenware. Hired by Thomas, possibly for textile production, were two women, who apparently labored in exchange for cash, snuff, shoes, rum, and other items.

Noah Porter's will of 1790 indicates his holdings at his death were: 100 acres near the meeting house with grist and saw mills and houses with a one-acre vegetable garden. The land was a rough triangle shape between Stonehouse Road, sweeping across Main Street to the lake with its eastern terminus about where Mason Street is today. The land not holding the dwellings and mills on the brook was designated as a wood lot.

Exports from town in 1800 were salted beef and pork, butter, cheese, lard, potatoes, onions, ham, bacon and livestock. Farm products for local consumption included corn, rye, oats, hay, apples (and later peaches) and timber, chiefly chestnut which survived and flourished at that time. From a subsistence standpoint, a family of five needed sixty bushels of grain a year requiring 3-6 acres of land depending upon the yield.

Silk making flourished in the area in the early 1800's and between 1800 and 1834 there were a number of "silk orchards" -mulberry trees- which were a good environment for silkworms. Two notable orchards were Dimmick's between Main and High Streets and Bacons near Springdale Avenue.

Up to 1870 about 40% of the land in the area was cleared for farming. By 1860 that percentage reached 70% as a peak and has fallen continuously since then.

As an example of the farms in the early 1800's, the following are excerpts from the Hartford Courant Archives:

1810- Three farms for sale, North Society; 1- on Skungamaug River 110 acres, house and barn, meadow, young orchard and older orchard, 2- 150 acres on Pond Hill, house, two barns, meadow sufficient for 20-30 tons of hay and 60-70 barrels of cider per year, 3- 60 acres, orchard and meadow.

1810- Coventry, North Society a few rods east of the meeting house, good dwelling house, large store, barn and smoke house, annexed by a distillery where from 1 to 2 thousand barrels of cider can be purchased in a good year, also upwards of 100 acres of land suitably divided into mowing, plowing and pasturing. The site has been a mercantile site for nearly 20 years and on the great middle turnpike from Hartford to Boston and in the center of a rich and flourishing society. Large quantities of beef, pork, butter, cheese and other products are offered for sale retailed at 8-10 thousand dollars annually.

1816- A good farm for sale in the first society of Coventry within a half-mile of the meeting house, 3 miles from a good grist mill, ten rods from a school house, 150 acres with a good house 30 by 40, a good convenient store 25 by 35, cheese and wood house, dairy house, a distillery and an aqueduct from a lasting fountain. The farm is square, 90 acres descending to the south well proportioned for mowing and plowing, and the remainder well situated for a wood lot. The farm will by good cultivation keep 30 head of stock.

Another indication of the changing character of the land was the closing of the Coventry Glass Works (1815-1848) partially due to the lack of fire wood to supply their furnaces. The major glass producers moved to New York and Pennsylvania where natural gas had been discovered.

The 1850 Federal Census of Agriculture indicates Coventry held: 214 farms containing 15,636 acres of improved land and 5,196 acres of unimproved land totaling nearly 90% of all the land in town. The largest farms were Fred Manning- 200 acres (Cross Street), John Woodward- 220 acres (Merrow Road and Goose Lane) and Eleazer Pomeroy- 190 acres (Boston Turnpike). Over 24,000 bushels of corn oats and rye were produced that year. The farms held 224 horses, 600 milk cows, 404 oxen, 909 other cattle, 2,440 sheep and 495 swine. Farm products included Irish potatoes, Indian corn, rye, oats, buckwheat, clover, and honey.

1855 (The New York Daily Times) Soil on stony hills of the region is thin and deficient of lime which causes the cattle to get lame easily. Farmers are beginning to use phosphate and guano (dung of sea birds or bats or ground fish parts). Also using deep plowing (two feet) and growing potatoes, corn and buckwheat.

Nathan Potter owned a farm in southern Coventry in 1893 near the Willmantic River. It contained 140 acres of which 60 were tillable. His herd of Jersey cows numbered thirty, of which twenty-two were giving milk. Thirty pounds of butter were churned each day using

an endless chain run by a 150-pound St. Bernard dog. 250 quarts of sweet creamery milk were also produced daily. The butter was sold for thirty cents a pound and the milk for 2-1/2 cents a quart. The products are well packaged and always contain a little more than the advertised weight. The daily revenue of \$15 provided a relatively prosperous living.

Towards the end of the century, while many farmers were striving for efficiency to compete with farms in the middle of the country, a new type of farmstead appeared in Connecticut: the gentleman's farm. While fancy barns had been a hallmark of economic success since early in the history of the state, these barns were something new. Men who had made fortunes in areas unrelated to farming began to acquire farms as symbols of their wealth. The barns on these properties were frequently designed by famous architects and were part of giant complexes that combined the luxury of a weekend retreat with the grit of a working farm. Of course, the grit was kept out of sight and the farms were as likely to produce prize animals as saleable crops. Some examples of these "gentlemen farms" include the Babcock/Prince place on South Street (later the Coventry Day School), the Hale homestead owned by the Petersens of New York City, and several farms in the South/Cross Street area owned by Henry Dimock, born in Coventry, but now a prominent New York City lawyer.

From the Hartford Courant, May 1892: H.F. Dimock of New York and his family are expected to occupy their summer home residence within a few days. (Cross Street) Mr. Dimock takes much interest in farming. He owns two farms formerly known as the Dr. Dimock and Rev. Booth places, and takes field after field and brings each to a high state of cultivation. The one now receiving attention contains sixteen acres. He has had men and teams upon it for nearly three years. For several months last season between fifty and sixty men with teams were engaged at an expense of over \$100 per day. Over \$15,000 has been expended and the end is not yet. One hundred cords of manure from Boston have been applied this spring. Joseph Stewart, who has charge of the farm, will plant the entire field- four acres with potatoes and twelve with corn. Among his herd of thirty-two cattle he has one noted cow, which is 27 years, and is now kept for the good she has done, having been "dry" for the past five years. There are ten driving and two team horses. Two windmills have been recently erected for pumping water. Coventry people enjoy seeing these wind mills in working order for this is the town where the business of manufacturing them commenced, people little thinking at that time that such power would be so generally used.

Surveys in 1930 reveal that Coventry held ~210 farms with ~16,200 acres dedicated to farming or woodlots. Dairy farming is still substantial, but chicken breeding has become popular too. Relative to 1850, the number of farms is about the same, but the acreage used has dropped about 20%, and livestock is more prevalent now than crops. Chicken farms appeared in Coventry in the 1930's and continued through the 1950's. Some of the owners included; Miller, Haven, Lipsky, Sepowitz, Popples, Winthrop and Zimmerman. Most were breeders. It is estimated that there were over a million chickens in Tolland County in the 1930's. A chicken by-products plant operated on Hop River Road for a short time in the '50's but was closed due to health concerns.

William McKinney moved to his farm (Cedar Swamp Road) in March of 1921. It included a house, an old barn and a chicken house, one horse and one cow. Soon after a Ford tractor

was acquired. In 1924 a milk route was started and more cows were purchased. 1925-26-timber was sold from the woods. Electricity was put in later from route 44A. They previously purchased ice from Bolton Pond for cooling, but now had a cooler for milk, water pumping, and an electric stove and refrigerator. The 1950's herd contained Ayershire cows, whose milk was easy to digest, and some automated equipment.

The Edmondson's came to Coventry in 1932. The McKinneys taught them to raise chickens, cows, and to start a garden. The Melody Farm on South Street has been in the Welles and Brainard family since 1916. For over 40 years in the mid-1900's it was a full service dairy farm.

Located on Bread & Milk Street, a farm was started by Jabez Kingsbury in 1846. It was called the Autumn View Farm. In the 1930's the farm held 100 Jersey cows, 60 of them for milking. Deliveries were made to Manchester and Bolton, and to a few lake colonies in the summer. Between 500 and 700 quarts of milk a day were produced. The farm had one of the first "flash pasteurizers" in the '30's. For a time chickens were raised, and both chickens and eggs were sold at markets. Andrew Kingsbury (3th generation) was a legislator, and in 1907 introduced the bill that made mountain laurel the state flower. This farm has the distinction as the longest continuously operating farm by a single family- now in the seventh generation over a period of 160 years.

One of the most significant changes to the town occurred between 1930 and 1950. The population grew from 1,554 to 4,043 during that time due to the beginning of the housing "boom". Nearly all residential development was on farm land and woodlots.

Hytone Farm's history began in Coventry in 1944 when Giovanni Peracchio purchased the land to grow fruits and vegetables with his son, Tony. A few cows were raised to milk during the winter months, so year-round income could be ensured. In 1960, when Giovanni retired, Tony purchased the farm and shifted the farm to dairy cows, as demand for New England vegetables changed. Tony's two sons, Bill and Tom grew up doing chores and learning how to operate the family farm. As the herd of Holsteins grew, more land was acquired to grow crops to feed the animals.

Now the farm at the top of the hill in Coventry has the fourth generation of Peracchios working the land. Bill, Tom, and now Bill's son, Greg, work together to produce quality milk on the family farm. They raise all their own Holstein cows for the farm and currently have 165 young stock. Crops grown for the animals consist of 220 areas of corn for silage and 130 acres of grass for silage. Hytone Farm has received many Distinguished Farming awards through the years. They recently formed a consortium and produce the "Farmers Cow" brand of fresh, local, hormone free milk.

A survey in 1994 indicated that Coventry's farmland covered 3,307 acres. (Forest and open space is not included here.) Farm land use included: alfalfa, berries, corn, Christmas trees, firewood fruit, horses, herbs, hay, llamas, livestock & dairy, pasture, pigs, pumpkins, sheep and vegetables.

Large farms today include several active dairy farms, two Christmas tree farms, two nurseries, an herb farm, two vineyards, a llama farm, an animal rescue farm and four

equestrian sites. The total land designated as “farm land” today totals over 3,500 acres. When aggregated with forest, open space, town parks and fields and the Nathan Hale State Forest, the total amounts to 38% of the land area in town.

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