

# Connecticut

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and Rural Life)**

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## CONNECTICUT

American history is deeply rooted in Connecticut -- the "land of the long river" and one of the thirteen original states. Although the state may be better known for its contributions in manufacturing and seafaring, a rich body of literature documenting more than three centuries of agriculture and rural life in the region can be found in the collections of the University of Connecticut Libraries and in other key repositories across Connecticut. The state's agrarian pioneers exerted considerable influence on the development of agriculture in New England and on the migration of agriculture west.

Connecticut's farms provided sustenance for the earliest immigrants from Europe, starting with the first settlements in 1634. These immigrants possessed basic knowledge of agricultural production--knowledge that was compatible with the state's climate and other prevailing conditions. The land, however, was only moderately adaptable to agriculture. The entire area has been glaciated, and except in some river valleys, the terrain is hilly, rocky, wooded, and of low fertility. Of critical significance however, was ownership of the land in fee simple. The farmland belonged to settlers and the well-being of the family depended upon the industry and dedication of all family members. With few exceptions, their rights could not be abolished.

Initially, farming was of a subsistence nature. The farmer and sons cleared fields of trees and moveable rocks (which were placed around the edges of the fields as stonewall fences). They planted, tended, and harvested the crops needed to sustain sheep, poultry, and cattle--the latter yielding milk, meat, and a source of power. In addition, small fruit orchards and berry patches were established. Female family members helped collect food from various plants and animals, processed food for immediate or later consumption, and used wool from the farm flock for knitting and weaving clothing.

As the number of farms increased, a small town would develop to provide the basic essentials of family life. Typically, a church, school, and small store were among the first structures built. At stores, family products were bartered for items that could not be made in the home. Gradually, subsistence farming gave way to larger and more specialized farm units and the village expanded to provide an increasing array of goods and services. Among the products manufactured were pottery, glass goods, tin and iron items, paper supplies, clocks, and furniture. These small plants provided employment for local men and women, and as the community grew, the services of specially trained individuals were required to meet legal, health and administrative needs. A remarkable recreation of nineteenth century life, Sturbridge Village, was developed recently on the Massachusetts and Connecticut border. It models the activities of people on farms and in towns in the period 1830-40. Extensive research supported the creation of this exhibit, with the goal of achieving authenticity to the greatest extent possible.

Connecticut can claim many agricultural innovations, including the founding of one of the nation's first agricultural societies. The Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Agriculture was established in New Haven County in 1794 to foster the application of proven methods for improving agricultural procedures. The Society initiated a long history of publication, and disseminated that information to rural communities. Serials issued by the State Agricultural

Society (SAS) were published as Transactions and Lists, and describe the activities of a number of county societies active among the farming communities during the 1800s. One such title published by SAS in Hartford, *Transactions of the Connecticut State Agricultural Society*, appeared annually with reports of the county societies.

The Brooklyn Connecticut Fair, founded in 1809, claims to be the oldest continuously held agricultural fair in the country. Descriptions of this annual event provide important insights into the evolution of rural communities and the development of common rural values. Titles such as Joseph Pritt's *Farmers Book and Family Instructor* (1845) depict the social aspects of agriculture and provide a snapshot of social attitudes and rural life in the 19th century.

The first state agricultural experiment station in the United States was established in Middletown, Connecticut in 1875, through the efforts of Samuel W. Johnson. This was the forerunner of the present-day Agricultural Experiment Stations at New Haven and Storrs. The first record of performance (ROP) program in the United States was established at Connecticut's Experiment Station, when breeders from across the nation sent pens of hens to the facility for performance and reporting.

The first 4-H club leader in the U.S. was A.J. Brundage, who founded the Mansfield Corn Club in 1912. It was a forerunner of 4-H work undertaken across the state and nation. In 1917 and 1918, Donald Jones developed a system for growing hybrid seed corn that revolutionized corn (maize) production throughout the U.S. and the world. The major gains in yields per acre prompted similar hybridization of other food grains, especially of wheat and rice.

The University of Connecticut began as the Storrs Agricultural School in 1881. A land grant college, it provided vigorous support for farmers and rural communities through publications, field days, and demonstrations such as the Storrs Egg Laying Contest, begun in 1911. Publications depicting the history of the Connecticut Agricultural College and its contribution to the farming and dairy industry in Connecticut are of particular interest to historians. Candidates for preservation include scholarly materials that document the history of research conducted on soils and animal husbandry, and how these efforts fostered the success of farmers both within Connecticut and throughout neighboring states.

Materials in the library collections held at the University of Connecticut also document the role that chemists played in exploring means of improving farming. Especially important was information from the letter files of S.W. Johnson, professor of agricultural chemistry at Yale University from 1877 to 1900. Edited by his daughter Elizabeth A. Osborne, Johnson's work describes succinctly the importance of research to the farmer, and farmers' contributions to research activity--much of which remains valid today.

In 1790 approximately 90% of the population of Connecticut was engaged in agriculture. By 1840 that percentage had decreased to 70%. The Industrial Revolution in New England further affected Connecticut's rural economy, and by 1900 46% of the population was engaged in agriculture. Currently, only about 2% of the population works directly in agricultural

production. This is a startling statistic. On the positive side, when most of a population is relieved of food production activities, more of the work force can attempt to solve other critical societal problems and thereby enhance quality of life for the population at large.

From a peak of over 20,000 commercial farms, fewer than 3,000 now exist. This sharp reduction is a concern of citizens who believe that a local supply of nutritious food is an essential safeguard and that permanent agricultural activity provides significant environmental benefits. Many people now regard it as in the public interest to preserve an agricultural land base in the state.

In the last two decades, legislative actions have sought to reorient rural land use policy. First, use-value taxation assessment procedures were adopted to temporarily relieve the economic pressures that forced conversion of productive farmland to non-farm development. Second, a program for the public purchase of development rights on superior cropland has been initiated and, if continued, will ensure permanent protection to selected land. The combination of these two programs may promote a resurgence of Connecticut agriculture.