

# Michigan

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

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## MICHIGAN

Michigan is richly endowed with water, being nearly surrounded by the largest bodies of fresh water in the world, with a shoreline longer than that of any other state in the Union and thousands of inland lakes and streams. The very name, "Michigan," derived from two Algonquin words, *michi* (great) and *gama* (lake), is a fitting tribute to the profound impact that this resource has had on the economic and social development of the state.

The Great Lakes served as the route for early European exploration and settlement, separating Michigan's sprawling Upper Peninsula from its familiar mitten-shaped Lower Peninsula. When French fur traders and missionaries arrived in the mid-17th century, they came upon Michigan's first farmers -- Algonquin women from the Chippewa, Ottawa, Menominee, and Potawatomi tribes -- dwelling within the borders of the Territory. Armed with basic tools for clearing the land, these early agriculturists grew crops in clearings where sunshine penetrated the dense forests that once covered the state. Beans, squash, pumpkins, and maize were planted in these "garden-beds," supplementing their main diet of fish and game.

It was the abundant game that drew the French into the region, resulting in the establishment of trading posts at strategic points along the lakeshores and riverbanks. The profitable fur trade was their main preoccupation, but the French made some effort at farming, cultivating crops for their own subsistence and/or the limited local market. Farms were allotted to French settlers under a feudal system and were laid out in narrow strips about a block wide, extending three miles back from the Detroit River. The narrow plots promoted neighborliness and provided water access for everyone. The land was not aggressively cleared for agricultural use, but the soil was rich and productive. The interest of the French in horticulture was great; apples, peaches, pears, and cherries were grown in considerable quantities, with the juices being made into brandy and cider for trade with the Native Americans. These French orchards marked the beginning of Michigan's great fruit industry.

With the overthrow of the French by the British in 1763, a few English farmers moved into Michigan; but, as title to the land had not yet been secured from the Native Americans by treaty, settlement was not encouraged. The farming and trading community on the Detroit River stood fairly unchanged for fifty years. The Territory remained isolated from other settled portions of the country, cut off by a vast stretch of forested land. After the War of 1812 the United States opened up lands in the Northwest Territory as compensation for soldiers; but unfavorable early government surveys and geological reports prompted Congress to divert settlers from Michigan and to offer lands in neighboring states instead. Today's "Water Wonderland" was regarded as an impenetrable swampland, with scarcely one acre out of one hundred deemed fit for cultivation, uninhabitable for white men, albeit a fit home for Native Americans, wild beasts, bullfrogs, muskrats, and malaria. A well-known poem of the day warned would-be immigrants not to go to Michigan, "that land of ills; the word means ague, fever and chills." It took a generation for Michigan to overcome its bad reputation.

Fortunately, Lewis Cass, the first governor of the Territory, paved the way for further settlement by negotiating treaties with the Native Americans, surveying and platting the land, lobbying Congress to appropriate money to build a road through northern Ohio, and publicizing the true character of the land. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 gave further impetus to settlement by placing Michigan in the direct line of travel. The years 1836-1837 saw more government land sold in Michigan than in any other state. From New England and New York the pioneers came by the thousands, taking up lands best suited to farming in areas with an abundant water supply and transportation access to markets. They transformed the wilderness with their homesteads and carried Michigan into statehood in 1837.

The immigration excitement soon extended to Europe. In 1848 a State publication, *Der Auswanderer Wegweiser (The Emigrant's Guide to the State of Michigan)*, was distributed in Germany with the express purpose of convincing German emigrants to purchase land in Michigan. Extolling the virtues of lake and river transportation and the cheap price of land (\$1.25 an acre), it succeeded in attracting a steady stream of industrious German settlers. In subsequent years other groups came, drawn first by the Homestead Act of 1862, which offered free of cost 160 acres of government land to those who would live on it for five years; and later by the booming lumber, mining and automobile industries. Irish, Dutch, Finns, Swedes, Poles, Italians, Canadians, Russians and a host of others established ethnic communities throughout the state, making Michigan one of the most culturally diverse states in the nation.

Many of these groups took to agriculture, introducing new crops and new methods of cultivation. As they spread across the state, the settlers soon discovered that Michigan's topography, soils, and climate varied greatly from place to place. This variation results from the repeated glaciations of the region, the extension of the state across six degrees of latitude, and the influence of the surrounding lakes, which moderate winter and summer temperatures. And, as farms were not laid out according to soil type but rather in a grid pattern still visible in many rural areas today, a single farm might embrace several soil types. The great variation in soils and climate permitted the cultivation of a wide variety of agricultural products, and the pioneer farmer's relative isolation and the resulting need for self-sufficiency further encouraged this diversification. Diversification remains the hallmark of Michigan agriculture even today -- only the state of California lays claim to a longer list of products.

Farmers learned to apply scientific principles and practices to crop selection and animal husbandry. Very early on, the territorial government had recognized the positive role that progressive agriculture could play in clearing the land of forest and stumps and draining swamps; and in utilizing soils, seeds, and climatic factors to best advantage. During the 1840s the national interest in agricultural education and farm organizations found its expression in Michigan through the creation of the *Michigan Farmer*, the oldest farm press in the United States. Dedicated to introducing improvements in the practice and science of agriculture, improving soil cultivation, and elevating the profession of farming,

the *Michigan Farmer* (along with the Michigan State Agricultural Society) was highly instrumental in advancing Michigan agriculture. It was an early advocate for the establishment of the Michigan Agricultural College (now called Michigan State University) in 1855 -- the first state agricultural college in the nation.

As the prototypical land-grant college, the Michigan Agricultural College considerably influenced the course of agricultural education nationwide, by serving as a model institution and by furnishing faculty and administrators from among the ranks of its graduates. Within the state, the College's prominent researchers advanced scientific agriculture by pioneering improvements in livestock breeding, soil quality, crop production, farm machinery, and plant disease and pest control. Their extension efforts, which began in 1875 with a series of winter farmers' institutes, brought valuable information directly to the farmer, gradually eroding the longstanding distrust of "book farming." By 1885 bulletins describing agricultural experiments were being distributed, and the College's extensive program of publication had begun. Meanwhile, the State Board of Agriculture, established by the legislature in 1861, was also collecting and disseminating farm information as well as encouraging the formation of agricultural societies. Associations for sugar cane growers (1862), horticulturalists (1870), and livestock breeders and feeders (1890), among others, gave early expression to the trend toward specialization; and, together with the Grange (1872), promoted agricultural interests and economic benefits. Their activities on behalf of agriculture are well documented in publications such as *The Grange Visitor* and the *Annual Report of the Michigan State Horticultural Society*.

With the coming of science to the farm, a new era for Michigan farming began. Subsistence farming gave way to increased commercial production as more and more land was brought under cultivation, and increased productivity made larger surpluses possible. The advancing agricultural frontier had encouraged the extension of the railway system; and the ensuing improvements in transportation widened the regional market for agricultural products. At the same time, local markets were exploding -- westward expansion had created an insatiable demand for Michigan white pine, and the lumber camps and saw mill towns, which quickly sprang up, were filled with people who needed to be fed. Copper and iron were discovered in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and a large influx of immigrants, mostly foreign, arrived to work in the mines. From 1869 to 1890, Michigan led the nation in lumber production, and the timber from Michigan's seemingly inexhaustible forests built and rebuilt Chicago, as well as many other American cities. In roughly the same years, from 1847 to 1900, Michigan led the nation in copper and iron production. The golden age of mining and lumbering left a lasting economic and social imprint on Michigan, creating fortunes, folklore, farms, railroads, harbors, and towns -- and ghost towns when the industries declined. Catastrophic forest fires followed logging, drastically altering the soil in large areas of the state. Cutover regions were sold as farmland, but the fertility of the soil often proved to be sub-marginal and many "farms" were later abandoned, reverting to the state for non-payment of taxes. Such losses served to retard the economic and social development of northern Michigan, in particular.

By the close of the nineteenth century, the era of specialization had arrived and farmers were cultivating crops especially suited to local conditions and market demands. While previously important products such as wheat and wool declined with the beef cattle and sheep industries, the growing urban areas created a profitable market for perishable products such as milk, eggs, fruits, and vegetables. Many farmers turned to the raising of dairy cattle, swine, and poultry. Swamplands were found to be ideally suited to the growing of mint, celery, and onions, and Michigan soon became a leader in production of these crops. The favorable climatic conditions along the lakeshore led to pre-eminence in the growing of apples, peaches, pears, plums, cherries, and berries. Other notable specialties included navy beans, potatoes, sugar beets, chicory, lettuce, cucumbers, and bedding plants.

The changing agricultural and rural life of the state has been richly documented in a wide range of publications. Invaluable reminiscences and historical articles are contained in the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* (1874-1929) and in the *Michigan History Magazine* (1917-present). A comprehensive account of Michigan agriculture and rural life is found in Lew Allen Chase's *Rural Michigan* (1922). Other notable scholarly treatments are contained in George N. Fuller's *Michigan: A Centennial History of the State and Its People* (1939) and in William James Beal's *History of the Michigan Agricultural College* (1915). *The Michigan Farmer* and *The Grange Visitor* are important agricultural press titles.

Although increasing urbanization in the twentieth century brought a reduction in the farm population, agriculture remained a major contributor to Michigan's economy and spurred the growth of related industries such as canneries, creameries, sugar refineries, and Michigan's world-famous breakfast cereal industry.