

New York

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

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NEW YORK

While people associate New York with the bustle and problems of urban life and the challenges of a commercial and industrial economy, New York's heritage is fundamentally agricultural and agriculture is still the largest economic sector in the state. Until 1870, New York had the largest number of farms in the nation and was among the top producers of many agricultural products.

Before people living in the area had become "New Yorkers" they were caring for plants and animals domesticated in their service -- the essence of agriculture. Farming proliferated when better adaptations of plants and animals for human use were developed. When these new breeds and techniques coincided with economic opportunity, native plants and animals were pushed to the margins of agriculture.

New Yorkers used their state government to speed the transition through public education in agriculture from grade school through the university level; by fostering agricultural and home economics research; by providing roads, railroads, and canals to connect producers to consumers; and by employing people to monitor and regulate the flow of farm products to consumers, and agricultural supplies and services to farmers. The transformation of milk from the basis of butter and cheese into a basic food available throughout the year is a noteworthy result of this process. New Yorkers also established agricultural societies and organizations to address the concerns of the farmer.

The agricultural literature is particularly rich in documenting the history of the increasing role of government in regulating commerce and in stimulating public education. Prior to 1880 New York farmers were essentially unregulated and received little support from the government. Over the next sixty years government intervention and support of agriculture grew dramatically, with largely positive results. Setting standards of purity of agricultural products and regulation of animal diseases were roles assumed by state government in the late 19th century as a result of dangerous epidemics (e.g. bovine pleuro pneumonia and bovine tuberculosis) and other public health threats (contaminated milk products).

Government intervention to prevent the watering down of fluid milk and to ensure minimum standards for milk (to protect against wholesale production of substandard milk products as by the some of the state's less reputable brewing and distillery owners) are another example of the early involvement of government in the nation's food supply. In the case of the dairy industry, it was gradually realized that ignorance of sound farm practices and food processing techniques was an even more serious impediment to the improvement of the industry than the prevention of deceptive practices.

Agricultural development and expansion occurred early in the history of New York State, and farming rapidly moved west with the pioneers. Because of the size and diversity of its economic sector, and the rapid movement west and the resulting competition, New York was forced to pioneer in the resolution of many of the problems of a rapidly expanding, market-driven American agriculture which were eventually faced by all states. Among the many important issues in social and economic history which New York had to face early on were: the development of the agricultural fair as an educative force, the lure of the city and high wages in

the factories, farm abandonment and its effect on rural communities, urban sprawl and its impact on rural communities, the intermingling of farm and non-farm families in rural areas and the tendency of non-farm values to dominate, the need for farmers to turn early from "general farming" to increasing specialization, the effect of mechanization on farm labor needs, the evolution of attitudes toward and conditions of seasonal workers and migrant labor, social integration of immigrant farmers in rural communities, and the need to set up forest preserves and conserve water resources and water quality in the face of rapacious logging.

The increasingly urban character of the state after the turn of the century shifted the focus of agriculture from local to regional and urban markets. With improvements in food processing and transportation technology, it became possible to efficiently market farm products, such as fluid milk, in the growing urban and suburban communities. When farmers sent their products to distant markets, they found themselves at the mercy of middlemen. These brokers began to collude to set prices for producers, forcing farmers to band together to demand higher prices. Thus began a long struggle to regulate, and eventually subsidize, farm prices, and to establish effective farm cooperative enterprises. This fascinating, ongoing political/economic saga, replete with bitter strikes and unending lawsuits and legislation, is exemplified in the early efforts of New York's Dairyman's League. Historians of economics and government trace the roots of today's system of state-federal marketing orders to these early efforts of farmers to exercise some control of their products as they entered increasingly remote and complex markets.

During the 20th century, forestry and recreation have merged with the agricultural heritage of New York as former farmland has been reallocated to native plants and animals, thereby reversing a pattern established over two and a half centuries. Again, the involvement of state agencies in this transition, especially with regard to the conservation of our natural resources, has been central.

The displacement of nature by domestic plants and animals, and the reversal of this process, has not been smooth. Public policies were shaped more during wartime emergencies and depressions than in times of peace and prosperity. State-sponsored investigative committees and state agencies collected and published information vital to the formation of public policy. As a result, the record of the state's emerging role in agriculture, rural economy, and conservation is widely distributed among the reports of numerous state agencies and commissions, typescripts of investigative hearings, agricultural and natural resource census publications, proceedings of relevant business and professional societies, public information bulletins, popular journals documenting rural life and concerns, and reports of research projects.

Regional, ethnic, and trade periodicals and government report series are a treasure trove of documentation of American history. Among the titles identified by scholarly review as important to preserve are: *Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society. Annual Report*; *Jewish Farmer* [Hebrew]; *American Plough-Boy*; *American Farmers Home Journal*; *American Silk Journal*; *Farm and Fireside*; and *Metropolitan and Rural Home*.

Pamphlets were largely aimed at a popular audience and convey the opinions, hopes, and fears of the populace and those attempting to educate and influence them. For example, *Importance of Agriculture as the Foremost Industry of the Nation* cites census information to illustrate that the cultivators of the soil are the controlling power in the republic. *Inquiry into the Causes of Agricultural Depression in the State of New York* (1895) is one of many titles aimed at reassuring farmers. *Improving the Condition of the Poor* (1917) contains a survey regarding food allowances for healthy children. A study of the girl scout program in relation to New York rural communities was prepared for the annual meeting of the N.Y.S. Council on rural social work (Feb. 12, 1923); *What about rural telephone?* (1945) boasts of the benefits of this new technology to the rural community.

In addition to the literature of rural life contained in pamphlets, early theses contain a tremendous amount of social and economic information. Sample titles include: *A study of the use of out-of-school environment by the teachers of certain small rural schools* (1928); *The family finances of 126 identical farm families in northern Livingston County* (1930); *The rural churches of Allegany County* (1933); *The single and unmarried population of counties and communities in New York State, 1930* (1936); *A social psychological study of a New York rural community* (1942); *The family in colonial New York: a sociological study* (1942); *An agricultural history of the Genessee Valley, 1790-1860* (1945). Theses of this period are in particularly poor condition and typed on acidic paper.