

Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station  
New Haven, Connecticut

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A HISTORY  
of  
CONNECTICUT AGRICULTURE

by  
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#### PRELIMINARY

**T**HIS paper is rather a sketch of the course of Connecticut agriculture than a complete history of it.

A history should cover the economic, political and social relations which went with and greatly affected its practice and its prosperity. But such a history would of itself be a volume and not, like this, a single paper among many others relating to the State.

However, great the temptation to discuss the broader aspects mentioned, it has been necessary therefore to confine the work simply to the story of the development of the art of farming, with only the barest reference to the economic and political conditions of its environment.

To set forth the effect on agriculture of the expansion of manufacturing, the embargo and non-intercourse acts, the opening of the west, the development of transportation and the six wars cannot be discussed here.

Yet they all deeply affected the course of agriculture. They were like the buffetings of heavy waves, with agriculture now on the peak and then in the trough of the sea, constantly conning the helm and trimming its sails to avoid shipwreck. Of course this experience is not peculiar to farming; all kinds of business are affected in the same way. But these great disturbances bore with a special severity on the farmer because of his inexperience in transacting business. For more than a century and a half farming was not a commercial business, but a domestic affair of each house-holder, chiefly confined to providing food and clothing for his own family.

Business acumen and the methods of trading have to be learned by long experience and they are a comparatively recent acquisition of the farmer.

It is not so long since the three courses open to young men were "the professions, business and farming." At present farming should really be a profession and a business in order to be a fairly successful "calling."

#### ABORIGINAL AGRICULTURE

No writing or legend gives the history of agriculture in New England before the coming of the white man. But on a somewhat extensive scale a simple kind of agriculture was certainly practiced by the Indian dwellers here long before the seventeenth century.

Almost its only relics are the few crops which they raised, of which maize was their staple and their priceless bequest to their successors, a crop which they cultivated extensively and stored for winter use.

This stored corn was all that stood between the first settlers and great scarcity of food if not of actual starvation and in the earlier days of the settlement was occasionally bought of the Indians to relieve a time of scarcity.

It has been one of our staple crops from Colonial days to the present and is now grown in larger quantity in the United States than any other.

Maize or Indian corn had its origin in America but has been changed by "domestication" so that it bears no close resemblance to any native species now known and has been developed out of all fitness to survive in a wild state. This was probably a work of centuries by people who have left no other record of this work in plant breeding than the domesticated plants which they have handed down to us.

It is a development for which we are indebted probably to some ancient civilization in Central or South America,

a development vastly more valuable than any of those of a modern "plant wizard."

Of particular interest is the Maya civilization developed in Yucatan, of which the earliest established date is 113 B. C., and the time of greatest development from 455-597 A. D. The Mayas reached a high state of culture as is shown by their monuments and inscriptions which have lately been studied and partly deciphered.

They planted corn, beans and pumpkins, taking advantage of the wet and dry seasons to harvest two crops annually. Among their records are pictures of the maize-god, planting corn, represented frequently as a youth with a leafy headdress, possibly meant to represent an opening ear of corn. This deity appears to be at the mercy of the evil deities when not protected by the good (59, p. 94). Other pictures show attacks by worms and birds, suggesting that the pests are as old as the plant. The zodiac sign, Virgo, the Virgin, is represented in Peruvian, Mexican and Maya sculpture as the Maize Mother.

Roger Williams (10) writes of the Indian tradition as to the source from which corn and beans came, "These birds," crows, "although they do the corn some hurt, yet scarce one native amongst an hundred will kill them, because they have a tradition, that the Crow brought them at first an Indian Grain of Corn in one Ear and an Indian or French Bean in another, from the great god Cantantowit's field in the Southwest from whence they hold came all their Corn and Beans." The last clause of this tradition is probably correct.

Our flint, dent and sweet (45) types, the very early and the tall, later maturing sorts of corn were probably all grown by the aborigines before the settlement by white men. In pre-Columbian days one or more varieties were

grown all the way from the St. Lawrence on the north to the Rio de la Plata on the south.

Pumpkins, squashes, beans and peas were also grown by the Indians, all but the last probably indigenous to this country.

"Peas" were grown by the Indians, according to the annalists, but the Canada pea and the field pea are old world plants. Possibly a *Lathyrus*, vetchling, or some small rounded bean is what is referred to.

Before the coming of the white man there was a plenty of land in Connecticut well enough cleared for growing what crops were needed. Besides using the tidal marshes and the alluvial lowlands, the aborigines had also long practiced burning portions of the woodland to make easier the taking of wild game, deer and turkeys. This cleared the forest of underbrush and young trees. Larger trees, (33) were girdled by the Indians to make open spaces where their crops could be planted, leaving them ready for further improvement (24, Vol. I).

The Narragansetts' land in Rhode Island was cleared of wood for eight or ten miles from the seashore and planted to corn (76. Vol. I).

There is abundant evidence of large clearings elsewhere.

Says Roger Williams, (10) "When a field is to be broken up, they have a very loving, sociable, speedy way to despatch it; all the neighbors, men and women, forty, fifty, a hundred, etc. joyne, and come in to help freely." The field was not wholly tilled but corn was planted in hills 12 to 20 inches in diameter and the soil of these hills was all that was cultivated. The hills were used over and over in successive years and they have persisted in some places until recent times. (10). Near the sea, at

least, fish, (menhaden) were exclusively used as a fertilizer.

The implements of the Indians were very crude. Iron was unknown. Stone hoes and perhaps spades have been found. Bones, shells and wood were also used; yet it is said of their cultivation (78), "Wherein they exceede our English husbandmen, keeping it so cleare with their Clamme-shell hoes as if it were a garden rather than a Cornefield, not suffering a choaking Weede to advance his audacious Head above their infant Corne, or an undermining Worme to spoile his Spurnes."

They also used a hoe made of the shoulder blade of a deer or a tortoise-shell, sharpened upon a stone and fastened to a stick.

"Their corne being ripe, they gather it, and, drying it hard in the sunne conveigh it to their barnes, which be great holes digged in the ground in form of a brasse pot, seeled with rinds of trees, wherein they put their corne, covering it from the inquisitive search of their gorman-dizing husbands, who would eate up both their allowed portion, and reserved Seede if they knew where to find it." (78).

Connected with aboriginal agriculture should be mentioned two important plants which were not cultivated but were used extensively. The first is a food plant to which writers refer as "rice," "Indian rice," or "Canada rice," *Zizania aquatica*, a grass which grows commonly along the banks of streams and marshes and in shallow water. It was easily gathered in the early fall and is palatable and nutritious. It is still gathered and used in the stuffing of game birds and is esteemed a luxury.

The other plant yielding a textile fiber, was the Indian hemp, *Apocynum cannabinum*, which grew commonly in

this State. From the fiber of this plant the women twisted twine or rope and made, among other things, fish nets, sometimes twenty or thirty feet long (69. Vol. I).

Oldham, in a trading trip to Connecticut in 1633, found that the Indian hemp grew spontaneously in the meadows in great abundance. "He purchased a quantity of it," it appeared to him "much to exceed the hemp grown in England." Later writers, however, pronounced it inferior to the other.

Roger Williams says, "the Indians all take tobacco, and it is commonly the only plant which the men labor in, the women managing all the rest." This was probably *Nicotiana rustica*, a smaller plant and inferior to our cultivated species. It is stated that it was grown in Canada as early as 1535. Flax and rushes and certain vegetable dyes were used for making baskets. Carrier asserts (9), that "a comparison, crop by crop, taking into consideration acreage and value of these products with all other crops now grown in the United States shows quite clearly that our agriculture is about one-third American." The agriculture of the Indians was chiefly if not wholly managed by the women. Stiles says, (61), that a common exhortation at marriage was in substance, "You, man, must take good Care to hunt deer and fish and provide Meat for your Squaw. You, Squaw, must take care to plant and hoe Corn and bring wood and cook Victuals for your Sannup."

The Indian men are generally regarded as lazy, shiftless and improvident in their family life, allowing or forcing their women, who were reckoned to be inferior beings, to do all the drudgery. No doubt there is much of truth in this. Laziness, incompetence and contempt of women did

not mark the aborigines as absolutely different from many of their successors in this State.

This judgment on Indian men must be tempered by the following facts:

The woman owned all the household property of the family, including the tools used in farming, cooking, dressing skins and making fabrics and in many tribes food, skins and individual dwellings or wigwams.

Indian descent was generally through the female line. Children belonged to the mother's, not the father's totem. In some cases a female sub-chief sold land to the settlers, but this, an international affair, was usually conducted by the male chief.<sup>1</sup>

The man had to be always ready to join in a foray against his neighbors of another tribe, or to repel a foray from them. He was at all times and of necessity a warrior. Hunting and fishing required skill and strength. Thus women were the property holders of the family groups. Men represented the army, legislature and courts and did such provisioning of the family as required capture and killing. All their work required at times protracted labor, exposure and hunger and when the search for food and the defense of the property and life allowed, they may have been, in the language of Kipling, "most 'scrutiating idle.'" When about his regular work the Indian was alert, crafty and superstitious with occasional streaks of loyalty and honor — and a reveller in all the arts of hideous cruelty.

<sup>1</sup>In the allotment of land in severalty to the Indians in modern times one grievance was found to be that it was allotted to the man and not to his wife, contrary to their idea of what was proper.

### AGRICULTURE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The aboriginal agriculture was the root on which the Colonial agriculture was grafted. No attempt will be made to recite the events of the colonization farther than to note those which have a very direct bearing on agricultural development.

It is important to consider the physical surroundings of the first traders and immigrants who began coming to Connecticut in 1631.

The country is described as a wilderness. Its topographical features were not very different from what obtains today. It was, of course, much more thickly wooded than now and abounded in heavy timber.<sup>2</sup>

There were of course no roads but only Indian trails and the first settlers from Massachusetts had perhaps to hew their way for a part of the journey.

The territory was not, however, wholly a forest, but abounded as we have seen in open, roughly cleared tracts, suitable for cultivation and capable of increased production with the use of iron implements, axes, hoes and spades which the colonists brought with them.

The whole area was occupied or claimed by various tribes of Indians who numbered, according to Trumbull's estimate, not less than twelve or fifteen thousand and possibly twenty thousand (69. Vol. I). But DeForest (23a), considers this much too high an estimate and holds that 1,200 warriors and 6,000 or 7,000 individuals is a liberal allowance for the aboriginal population.

They were more numerous in Connecticut, in propor-

<sup>2</sup> (31) "The pine tree challengeth the next place and that sort which is called the Board pine is the principal; it is a stately, large tree, very tall, and sometimes two or three fadoms about; of the body the English make large Canows of 20 foot long, and two feet and a half over, hollowing them out with an adds and shaping the outside out like a boat."

tion to area, than elsewhere in New England, for the land was rich in game, the waters rich in fish and the soil, in parts, very fertile.

These Indians chiefly belonged to the Algonquin family while over the border in New York was the Iroquois family, or the "Six Nations."

These families were divided into a considerable number of tribes.

Thus the west shores of Narraganset Bay were peopled by the Narragansetts, numerous and warlike, who held in partial subjection the weaker Nyantics near Point Judith. The fair dealing and tact of Roger Williams did much to restrain the hostility of the Narragansetts to the settlers. To the west of these and about the Thames River were the still more formidable Pequots who for fierceness and bravery were preëminent in southern New England. Westward, in the lower Connecticut valley, were the Monhegans, a small but valiant tribe held tributary to the Pequots and restive under it. There were also numerous lesser tribes within the present boundaries of this State, Nehantics, Quinnipiacs, Tunxis, Podunks and others. The thickly wooded mountain ranges between Connecticut and the Hudson had few inhabitants. But beyond, in New York, were the fierce Mohawks, dreaded by all the others, to whom the Mohegans paid yearly blackmail to avoid plunder and murder as far as possible (26).

Down to about the time of the first settlement of Connecticut the New England settlers had experienced no great trouble with the Indians.

They were at first disposed to be friendly but as the settlements began to be pushed further inland and some of their best clearings to be occupied by the invaders, even

though the land had been fairly bought of the tribal chiefs, hostility increased and soon resulted in actual war.

Of predatory wild beasts, bears, wolves, panthers, lynxes and foxes were very common and, as will be seen later, were very destructive to the livestock and crops of the settlers for more than a century.

Into this country adventurers came from Massachusetts in 1633 and halted at Windsor. This was a trading expedition and made no permanent settlement. In 1635 about sixty men, women and children with their cows, horses and swine came overland from Plymouth and Massachusetts Colonies to the region of Hartford, starting on October 15th. They were unable to build dwellings before winter, their goods which were sent by sea were lost and most of them made their way back to Boston.

A very few remained (10). But in 1636 Wethersfield, Windsor and Hartford were settled by colonists from Massachusetts.

The Newton (Cambridge) congregation, (38) through their minister, Rev. Thomas Hooker, urged from the authorities permission to migrate.

The reasons given were, the crowded state of their lands which prevented their friends in England from joining them,<sup>3</sup> the fertility of the Connecticut soil as reported by Oldham and the fact that settlement would shut out the Dutch who were trying to establish a claim to Connecticut. "The minds of this people were strongly inclined to plant themselves there."

Hooker wisely did not mention in his petition that there was considerable discontent also with the narrowness and

<sup>3</sup> Cotton Mather, (65. p. 17), in referring to the migration from Massachusetts, said: "Massachusetts soon became like a hive overstocked with bees, and many thought of swarming into other plantations."

strictness of the Winthrop-Cotton administration in Massachusetts.

Permission was rather grudgingly given and a migration followed, apparently in three companies. One, of one hundred persons, mainly from Dorchester, Mass., journeyed overland in fourteen days and settled in Windsor. The second company, mainly from Watertown, Mass., probably went from Boston by water to Wethersfield. The third made their way overland with 160 head of cattle "and fed of their milk on the way," and settled in Hartford. "Women and children took part in this pleasant summer journey which lasted about two weeks." Mrs. Hooker, being ill was carried in a horse litter (26). In the following year 800 people were living in these towns (or settlements), forming the Colony of Connecticut.

In 1638 the town of New Haven was founded under the leadership of Davenport and Eaton, which soon became the republic of New Haven, including Milford and Stamford, to which Southold on Long Island and Branford were afterwards added (26). Prior to 1640 there were at least nine settlements made, four on the Connecticut River and five others on the shore of Long Island Sound. In the next decade five others were made on the Sound shore and one inland. Between 1650 and 1685 eleven new settlements were made, three on the Connecticut River, one on the seashore and seven not on navigable waters. From 1685 to 1700 eight settlements were made along the eastern side of the State as far north as Windham and two other inland settlements. The harbors of New London, Saybrook, New Haven, Stratford, Bridgeport, Norwalk and Greenwich were all occupied.

Thus, in the seventeenth century at least thirty-eight settlements were made in Connecticut, eighteen on navi-



