

Farm and Market in Early Connecticut

The first English settlers of New England were a mixed bag of professionals, tradesmen, farmers, soldiers, and fishermen; but they all became farmers by necessity. Survival was the first order of business, and subsistence required farming. Farming remained the principle occupation of the majority of Americans into the twentieth century. The farm was the family home, the family business, and the family legacy, all in one.

The English learned to plant corn in the Indian manner, but always preferred their familiar grains from England. Wheat was prized, but hard to grow here and often subject to diseases and pests. Rye was more reliable, but very down-market. Barley was essential for beer. Oats was for animals. The thing was, Indian corn (maize, or what we Americans call "corn") was substantially more productive than any of the English grains. It delivered twice the grain per acre of wheat.

They wrote home about how well the wheat grew (only occasionally true), but they lived on 'rye and Indian,' a 1:2 or 1:5 mix of rye and native maize.

In the early days the English imported cattle, more for motive power than for meat and milk. Logging virgin timber and clearing rocks and stumps was heavy work, and oxen were preferred. In time, all the English domestic animals were imported. Bounties on predators (wolves, bears, mountain lions) helped make the woods safe for cattle. The settlers followed the English practice of letting stock forage at large. They carefully fenced their crop fields, but otherwise let them roam. Even in the fierce New England winters, they let horses, sheep, pigs, goats, and cattle of all kinds fend for themselves. No one thought to build so much as a lean-to (much less a barn) for animals. Mortality, particularly among foals and calves, was predictably high, and milk production from the family cow predictably low. At this early stage, it hardly mattered. There was simply not enough labor available to 'properly' tend cattle or fields beyond the bare essentials. Despite such seeming carelessness, their stock multiplied in the large, increasingly predator-free environment.



Photograph courtesy of the Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums.

Most Connecticut farming was "extensive" rather than "intensive." Land was plentiful, labor was scarce, and capital (whether cash or tools and improvements) was scarcer still. The most likely land was cleared first. When that was exhausted, more land was cleared. Connecticut became a dominant exporter of horses and other livestock in part because stock-raising required comparatively little labor.

Labor saved in one endeavor was always needed in another. The Sabbath was a welcome respite.

In places where nature favored certain crops, settlers did put in the effort to farm intensively. The shoreline from Stonington to Saybrook had milder winters than inland. By the 1750s, dairying there took advantage of the longer season of available pasturage, and led to better care for the dairy herds. Tobacco grew well in Windsor. It required significant hand work throughout the process of growing,

harvesting, and curing for market. It was among the first crops planted (1640) and one of the few that found a market in Britain.

Finding a market was a crucial part of survival for Connecticut. They needed salt, iron tools, and other things they could not make themselves. Trade was a necessity. The beaver and fur trades were played out in southern New England. Britain had no need of farm produce, and sending lumber across the Atlantic was too risky and expensive to pay. Connecticut never developed a direct trade with Britain. They relied instead on traders in Boston (and later, New York) for finished goods from Britain, paying with salt pork, grain, and other farm produce. As Boston became a more developed trading center, neighboring farms could no longer feed the growing population of merchants, artisans, clerks, laborers, sailors, etc. Food from Connecticut allowed Boston to prosper, and gave Connecticut an outlet for its small surplus. This coastwise trade was essential, but not sufficient to pay for all the tools and finished goods Connecticut needed.

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The mission of the Old Lyme Historical Society, Incorporated, is to collect, preserve, interpret and promote the rich history of Old Lyme, Connecticut and its environs for the benefit of residents and visitors.

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From the Chair ...

Dear Members,

A mild, wet spring brought a bountiful summer to the fields and gardens of Old Lyme. It's been a busy season for the Historical Society as well. A successful Spring Plant Sale of hydrangeas from Mark Comstock led things off, with talks on WWI memorials of Connecticut, the architecture of Lyme Street, and a conversation with Jane Ludington about that family's history here. We did our part for Make Music Day (June 21) with a 'percussion wall' and the help of scores of passing kids. As usual, we were at the Midsummer Festival, and helped to sponsor the Town Band Concert and Ice Cream Social. A recent pot-luck picnic with the Board of Trustees and the Archives crew was such fun, we thought we should invite the whole membership next summer. Let us know what you think!

We're grateful for new **volunteers in our Archives**. Thank you all! As noted in this issue, folks still on the fence about volunteering needn't feel left out. There's plenty of work to do for those interested in local history. We are also looking for **volunteers in our Oral History project**. If you would like to learn how to collect and process oral histories, or if you have a candidate in mind who should be interviewed, please contact us. We'd love to hear from you.

This fall our events include an interesting talk and performance by Kevin Johnson, who will present, in character, **the story of Civil War Pvt. William Webb**, an African-American soldier of Co. F, 29th Conn. Vol. Inf. (Colored). Johnson's performance has garnered much praise, and we look forward to seeing him at **55 Lyme Street on Thursday, September 21 at 7:00pm**.

Our popular **Fall Plant Sale** will be held at **55 Lyme Street midday on Saturday and Sunday, October 7 & 8**. Fall annuals and perennials at great prices! Please check our web site for precise hours as we get closer.

This issue's lead article provides some background for a talk to be given by local historian Bruce Stark on his latest book, ***The Myth and Reality of Slavery in Eastern Connecticut***. With meticulous and exhaustive research, Stark examines the history of a vast colonial estate in New Salem parish, spanning southern Colchester and northern Lyme in the 18th century. The Browns of Salem, MA were absentee landlords renting to tenant farmers, some of whom held slaves, as did the Brown family. We seldom think of tenant farming in New England, much less of slave plantations. **Please join us at 55 Lyme Street on Thursday, October 26 at 7:00pm**. It promises to be an interesting talk.

As always, please see our website for details of these and other Old Lyme Historical Society events. Thank you for your support!

– Mark Terwilliger, *Chair*,
Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.



Photograph by James Meehan

Old Lyme Historical Society archivists: Mary Jo Kelly Nosal, Eleanor Hufford, Michaelle Pearson, Mary Ellen Jewett, Lilo Hess, Nancy Bebee, and Suzanne Zack. (not shown: Alison Mitchell and Sandra Downing)

Change and Growth for the OLHSI Archives

The 2022-23 year was one of change and growth for the Old Lyme Historical Society Archives. The big change was that Alison Mitchell, after several years serving as Chair of the Archives Committee has stepped down as Chair, but remains an integral part of the committee. Michaelle Pearson and Mary Ellen Jewett have assumed the position of Co-Chairs. The Society thanks Alison for her dedication and leadership in establishing the Archives. She will be a hard act to follow!

During the past year we have accessioned close to 300 objects. These include: more of the McCurdy letters; tools from the Noyes family, as well as furniture from them; the records of the McCurdy-Salisbury Educational Foundation; memorabilia from Jennie Rubera's 30 plus years as a teacher at Mile Creek school; the compilation of a list of veterans buried in Old Lyme from ancient times to the present day; dishes, menus, and pictures from Ferry tavern; a bell from the Congregational Church; a friendship quilt; maps of the cemeteries in Old Lyme; the records of the Duck River Garden Club; a memoir from the Griswold Family as well as some household items; memorabilia from the Pythagoras Lodge as well as numerous pictures and newspaper articles about Old Lyme.

In addition, we have responded to numerous emails and phone inquiries about genealogy and history of buildings in town. We have added to the collection of town reports. We continue to work with Edie Twining to supply artifacts appropriate to the theme of her exhibits in the post office, the town hall, or the display cases in the main hall of 55 Lyme Street. As the Archives continues to grow, we are seeking to add more archivists as well as community awareness about our collection and desire to preserve the history of Old Lyme.

– *Michaelle Pearson & Mary Ellen Jewett
Co-Chairs, OLHSI Archives Committee*

Awards ...



Photographs by James Meehan

Michaelle Pearson, Phoebe, Van, and Jim Lampos

The Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc. is pleased to announce the 2023 recipient of the Carol Noyes Winters Scholarship which is awarded to an outstanding Lyme-Old Lyme student intending to study history in college. The award this year was presented to Theodore Silvanos (Van) Lampos. He is the son of Michaelle Pearson and James Lampos.

Throughout his early years and school career Van has developed and demonstrated his empathy for others and his deep concern for human rights issues. He will attend the American University in Washington, DC where he hopes his studies will lead him to a future career in political science, government, and diplomacy. Congratulations Van!



OLHSI Chair, Mark Terwilliger and Elaine Stiles

At this year's annual Meeting, the James Brewster Noyes Award was presented to the Oral History Project Committee Chair, Elaine Stiles. The award honors a Society member who goes "above and beyond" in time and effort to support the Old Lyme Historical Society.

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The sugar islands of the Caribbean were the obvious choice. They were close, rich, and in need of many things Connecticut could supply. Sugar was so profitable (a kind of ‘drug trade’ of its day) that every available acre was dedicated to the cash crop. They grew only a part of the food they needed and had to import nearly everything else. The West Indies trade was important for all the North American colonies. The individual situation of each led it to dominate in particular areas. Connecticut became the chief provider of horses and cattle, used primarily to power the sugar mills. It also provided barrel hoops and staves, lumber, salted pork and beef, onions (a Wethersfield specialty), cheese, and other products of farm and forest. Much of this trade was carried on in ships built in Connecticut, some of which were sold in the Caribbean along with their cargo. Salt and ‘tropical groceries’ (chiefly sugar, rum, and molasses; but also some exotic fruit, woods, and botanicals) were carried back to Connecticut. Part of this was consumed in Connecticut, and part was traded on in exchange for finished goods from Britain.

From major ports to market towns and rural peddlers, the network of exchange sent out finished products and assembled, bit by bit, the cargoes of the coastwise and West Indies trade. Strong population growth allowed farm families to produce a bit extra for trade: cutting shingles, making barrel hoops and staves, cutting timber, making potash, etc. The ‘extensive’ approach to farming did not change at first, but growing population allowed more production.

By 1750 all the land in Connecticut had been granted to individuals. Those discontented with their share began to leave for points north and west. Still the production increased. On the eve of the Revolution (1768-1772) Connecticut was supplying its own needs and a significant part of those of New Hampshire, Boston, and the West Indies. Their volume of West Indies trade placed them fifth among the 13 colonies, behind such giants as Massachusetts, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.

The Revolution and its aftermath ruined trade, which did not recover until the 1790s. In the interim, her farm families and merchants had made Connecticut “The Provisions State,” doing more than any other to keep the northern Continental Army alive and in the field. It came at a steep price. Veterans and farmers alike were left holding currency made worthless by inflation. The land that had yielded enough under sub-optimal treatment was yielding even less. Those with marginal holdings began to leave in large numbers for the newly opened Genesee Valley in New York or Connecticut’s Western Reserve in the Ohio country.

Those better situated began to take a serious look at their farming practices. A call for a more scientific approach to farming had been raised in the 1750s. By the 1790s many began to listen—but that is a story for another day.

– Mark Terwilliger



The Life and Times of Pfc. William Webb

*An African-American
Civil War Soldier
from Connecticut,
enacted in character
by Kevin Johnson*

**Thursday, Sept. 21, 2023
7–8 p.m.**

55 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, CT
Free Admission

The Myth & Reality of Slavery in Eastern Connecticut

*The little-known story
of great estates, their owners,
tenants, and the enslaved in
New Salem (Lyme and Colchester)
in the 18th century; presented by
Connecticut historian and author
Bruce Stark.*

**Thursday, Oct. 26, 2023
7–8 p.m.**

55 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, CT
Free Admission