

THE FARMER AT WORK IN COLONIAL PENNSYLVANIA

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IN attempting to show the farmer at work in colonial Pennsylvania, extensive use must be made of contemporary accounts left by travelers and by the farmers themselves. It is well known that official documents of all kinds give very scant descriptions of farmers or farming. While contemporary observations yield a great deal of material which is not to be found elsewhere, they are not always as accurate or impartial as one wishes. Especially is this true when comments are made concerning agriculture. Accounts and reports of that occupation are sometimes so obviously partial one way or another that one is forced to consider them historically unreliable. For example, the enthusiastic accounts of the delightful possibilities of farming which William Penn gave to prospective colonists;¹ and the charming "Account" of Gabriel Thomas,² and others of a similar nature which are familiar to everyone, hardly compare favorably with the adverse criticisms offered by various other observers. While Penn, Thomas, and others laud Pennsylvania as a land of incomparable opportunity, a certain German, after having lived in the colony for a time, struck an entirely different note when he wrote in 1728:

O these Liars! who in their well-written and printed missives send us such glowing accounts about the climate of this country [Pennsylvania] and other things described so beautifully and paradisaical which deceived so many hundred people—even me—I would not like to share their just reward. If I had but wings to fly, I

¹ William Penn, "A Further Account of the Province of Pennsylvania, 1685," Albert Cook Myers, (ed.), *Narratives of Early Pennsylvania, West New Jersey, and Delaware, 1630-1707* (New York, 1914), pp. 259-278. See also, "Letter from William Penn to the Committee of the Free Society of Traders, 1683," *Ibid.*, pp. 224-242.

² Gabriel Thomas, "An Historical and Geographical Account of Pennsylvania and of West-New-Jersey, 1698," *Ibid.*, pp. 313-352.

would soon hie myself from hence to Europe, but I dread the tempestuous ocean and the pirates, dangers to which one is always exposed. . . .³

Again, towards the end of the colonial period, we find the anonymous author of the justly well-known "American Husbandry" taking the Pennsylvania farmer to task in this vein:

There is nothing that can give a man, that only travels through a country, so bad an opinion of the husbandry of it, as to see two circumstances; first, the fences in bad order; and secondly, the corn full of weeds. In many parts of Pennsylvania, a country in which nature has done so much, man will do so little, that both these are almost everywhere to be seen by every traveler.⁴

However, these differences in opinion concerning the state of agriculture in colonial Pennsylvania only illustrate what is quite evident even today—that two observers rarely see the same scene in the same way. One needs to think only of the conflicting testimony given by witnesses at the hearing following an automobile accident to realize that fact. So we shall set aside for the time being these extreme glorifications and extreme condemnations, and attempt to show the normal farmer at work and at leisure.

It may be well to pause here to state that what follows is not entirely a new furrow in the field of Pennsylvania colonial history. That has been fertile ground in which many have worked and have worked well. Hence instead of dealing extensively with the general subject of agriculture, it shall rather be the purpose of this paper to sketch briefly the colonial Pennsylvania farmer in his fields, his home, and in his moments of relaxation, few though the latter surely were.

Let us consider first, the most prized possession of the farmer—his land. Likely the first thing to attract the eye of a traveler as he approached a clearing were the fences. Many were built of rails, split in halves, quarters, or eighths, laid one above the other in zig-zag fashion, commonly called the "worm fence"; others were a "live" hedge; and occasionally some were made of

³"Diary of a Voyage from Rotterdam to Philadelphia in 1728," translated by Julius F. Sachse, The Pennsylvania German Society, *Proceedings and Addresses*, XVIII (Lancaster, 1909), 23-24.

⁴*American Husbandry* (London, 1775), I, 168-169.

stone taken from the fields during land clearing. These were an important feature of the rural landscape and of the farmer's equipment. Every field, whether meadow, wheat, or orchard, was surrounded by one or the other of these types of fences. It is true they were an expensive item in the annual upkeep of the farm, but due to the practice of allowing the live-stock to run at large much of the time, fences were an indispensable protection to the crops. That they were so regarded is attested by the numerous references made to their methods of construction and the need for their constant repair.⁵

The farm-house would very likely be the next object of interest. It was usually a log structure, although by the middle of the eighteenth century the Germans, especially, were using stone. They were at best, however, miserable structures, poorly lighted, ill ventilated, and usually unsanitary. The furniture was commonly hand-made, except perhaps one or two pieces which the owner had brought with him from the mother country. The interior was generally bare, except for a possible motto or proverb done in cross-stitch, now a desirable item for those interested in antiques.

Towards the close of the eighteenth century the "milk-house," or "spring-house," became a familiar sight in the rural scene. Used to preserve milk, vegetables, and fruit, this forerunner of the modern refrigerator was a godsend to the housewife.

The attention of the traveler was next directed to the barn. Situated not very far from the dwelling-house, and often regarded as superior to the latter in the mind of the farmer, it offered a good criterion by which the traveler estimated his host's prosperity. Usually it was a log structure, ordinarily about fifty feet by thirty feet in size, and was used to store grain from the fields and to stable the horses, cattle, oxen, and other domestic animals of the farm. The barn also served as an indication of the antecedents of the owner. If the barn was provided with a fore-bay, it doubtless was built by a German; if it stood on a flat, the builder was of English descent. Various farm operations were also car-

⁵ Gottlieb Mittelberger, *Journey to Pennsylvania in the year 1750 and Return to Germany in the year 1754*. Translated by Carl T. Eben (Philadelphia, 1898), p. 30; Francis Daniel Pastorius, "Circumstantial Geographical Description of Pennsylvania, 1700," in Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 405; *American Husbandry*, I, 167-168.

ried on in the barn, such as threshing and cleaning flax; in summer the women of the household spun their wool on the barn floor.⁶ The more prosperous establishments included in addition several other separate and useful buildings—the hogpen, the poultryhouse, and the smokehouse. These together with the dwelling and the barn constituted the physical properties of the farm.

Turning to the produce of the fields, abundant testimony is found to prove that during the colonial period, the Pennsylvania farmer, forced to be virtually self-sustaining, followed a policy of wide diversification in cultivation, a condition which characterizes Pennsylvania agriculture even today. Among the crops grown were wheat, tobacco, rye, oats, barley, buckwheat, Indian corn, peas, beans, hemp, flax, turnips, potatoes, and many varieties of fruits.⁷

In the early years of the colony, tobacco was the chief article of export as well as the crop most extensively raised. However, during the first decade of the eighteenth century, owing to Virginia's continued success with tobacco, and to Pennsylvania's growing trade in wheat and flour with other American colonies and with Europe, it was supplanted by wheat as the most commonly cultivated crop. Indeed, no less a personage than the author of *American Husbandry* called wheat "the grand article of the province."⁸ In this connection it may be of some interest to note that as late as 1933, wheat was listed as fourth in importance among the crops of Pennsylvania, being preceded only by hay, corn, and potatoes, while tobacco was given seventh ranking.⁹

In addition to the crops listed above, several interesting attempts were made to produce silk in Pennsylvania, because of the abundance of mulberry trees. These early attempts were not profitable and the silk industry in colonial Pennsylvania never became important.

Among the live-stock raised were cattle, horses, sheep, and hogs. Numbers varied of course, but the tax returns indicate that the average number of horses on the farm ranged from three to five.

⁶ St. John de Crevecoeur, *Sketches of Eighteenth Century America* (New Haven, 1925), pp. 141-142.

⁷ Gabriel Thomas, "An Historical and Geographical Account of Pennsylvania and of West New Jersey, 1698," in Myers, *op. cit.*, 323-324.

⁸ *American Husbandry*, I, 157; Mary Alice Hanna, *Trade of the Delaware District Before the Revolution*, *Smith College Studies in History*, II (1917), 234-348.

⁹ *The Pennsylvania Manual* (1933), p. 101.

The numbers of cattle reported were slightly higher, although William Shipley of Philadelphia county had, in 1774, a herd of 100 cattle,¹⁰ and herds of twenty to forty were not uncommon.¹¹

In the care of livestock, however, our early farmers were very indifferent. The cattle, particularly, suffered from lack of attention. Allowed to roam at large during the day, and brought back to the barn at night only long enough to be milked, and then set loose once more, they were compelled to find their own food and shelter.¹² One of the most harmful results of this practice was the loss of dung which the farmer unwittingly suffered.

That this lack of attention did not go entirely unnoticed is to be seen in the frequency with which the colonial assembly attempted by statute to improve the breeding of horses, cattle, and swine.¹³ Of course it must be realized that one reason for this neglect of live-stock was the mildness of the climate, but regardless of that fact, on the charge of carelessness, the colonial farmer stands justly indicted.

This disregard for the welfare of the livestock was similar to the poor management of the land. Almost without exception, our early farmers were condemned for their indifferent husbandry. Having cleared one field, the system used in the other middle colonies was closely followed by Pennsylvania farmers. Wheat was sown until the land would no longer produce. Barley would then be planted again and again until it would no longer produce, the wheat having been transferred to another field.¹⁴ In short, the system was one which showed absolutely no regard for future crops.

The system as practiced on a farm at Durham, fifty miles from Philadelphia, offers a good illustration of that followed very largely throughout the colony. This system shows the variations in planting over a fourteen year period. Wheat was planted the first and second years, followed by a year of corn, after which wheat was again planted for two years: the fourth and fifth. The

¹⁰ *The Pennsylvania Archives*, Third Series, XIV, 402. *American Husbandry*, I, 166-167, claims some farmers had as many as 400 or 500 head of cattle.

¹¹ *The Pennsylvania Archives*, Third Series, XIV, *passim*.

¹² Mittelberger, *op. cit.*, p. 68; *American Husbandry*, I, 166-167.

¹³ *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania*, II (Harrisburg, 1896), 93; III, 422-424, etc.

¹⁴ *American Husbandry*, I, 158, 171-172, 173.

sixth, seventh, eighth, tenth and twelfth years were devoted to barley, the ninth having been given over to oats, and the eleventh to buckwheat. In the thirteenth year oats were again planted, and peas in the fourteenth. The completion of this cycle was followed by allowing the land to lie idle for seven years or more during which time it was overrun with weeds.¹⁵

That any crops whatsoever were obtained from a system of this sort is ample proof of the excellence of the land, and the continuance of such a system was possible only because land was plentiful and the farmer could always move westward.

However, one practice which, although borrowed from Europe, was more highly developed in Pennsylvania than in any other colony, was that of watering the meadows by conducting streams of water in canals dug along the sides of the hills and whenever needed was allowed to run down into the fields through small troughs cut into the sides of the hills.¹⁶

Improvements such as this were slow in making their appearance in Pennsylvania, as indeed was true of the other colonies. It is true that before the Revolution the horse drawn seed drill, invented by Jethro Tull of England about 1750, was used to some extent in Pennsylvania by the more advanced farmers;¹⁷ but with that exception, it is almost impossible to find any evidence of actual improvements in the construction of farm implements in the colonial period. Grain was sown by hand, reaped with a sickle, threshed with a flail or tread by horses.¹⁸

Even with all this waste of land and with all the lack of modern methods and equipment, the Pennsylvania farmer at the time of the American Revolution was perhaps the most well-to-do among the thirteen colonies. One well-known writer stated in 1755 that Pennsylvania produced enough foodstuffs to feed 100,000 persons in addition to its own population.¹⁹

The farmer's life did not consist entirely of hard labor on the soil. Judging from contemporary accounts, he enjoyed his hours of relaxation as his descendants do today. True he did not have the automobile, the movies, or the radio. Nevertheless, he thor-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 171-172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 166.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 159.

¹⁸ J. P. Barnes, "The Agriculture of Lehigh County," Pennsylvania Board of Agriculture, *Annual Reports*, III (1879), 245-247.

¹⁹ William Smith, *Brief State of the Province of Pennsylvania* (New York, 1865), p. 10.

oughly enjoyed many amusements. Especially did he take great delight when an opportunity arose to be in the company of other farmers. These occasions were by no means few. On his own farm, several times during the year, the work demanded other hands in addition to those of himself and his family. This was particularly true in the autumn; for then came the harvest and the need for additional men to cut and thresh the grain. That was the time also for the butchering of the livestock and preparing the meat derived therefrom for winter use. These were gala times in the year on the farm.

As the time for the harvest season approached, the women made great preparations for the maintenance of the additional workmen needed in the fields. Meats were boiled, roasted, and fried; cakes and tarts were baked; and the supplies of beer and rum replenished. The harvesters of colonial days, as today, were men of prodigious appetites.²⁰ The harvest was not only a time of work; it was a social event as well. And the farmer made good use of this opportunity to enjoy himself. In the evening, with the work of the day completed, everyone—men, women and children, would gather in the clearing surrounding the house to sing and play, and if perchance one of them could play the violin, an impromptu dance was held. But the party was forced to break up early, and retire for rest, the morrow would bring another share of hard work.

However, not only for its social activities did the farmer look forward each year to the harvest season. Only when the grain was threshed and stored in the barn could the farmer know whether or not his year had been a successful one; only then would he know whether or not his efforts had borne fruit. Whenever the yield was a good one, his joy was complete.

It was not always necessary for the farmer and his family to combine work and pleasure, for the opportunities for relaxation off the farm were varied and numerous. Horse racing, horse shows, barbecues, cock fights, and dances were held fairly regularly in the scattered villages of the colony, and travelers record the presence of other than villagers at many of these frolics.²¹

²⁰ Robert Parke to Mary Valentine, 10 mo. 1725, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, V (1881), 350.

²¹ "Diary of James Allen of Philadelphia, 1770-1778," *Ibid.*, IX (1885), 180; "Extracts from the Diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer, 1768-1798." *Ibid.*, XVI (1892), 93, 95, 96.

An occasional exhibition of tight-rope walking usually thrilled everyone present.²² Then, too, weddings and funerals were occasions of great festivity. Weddings, especially, required extensive preparation, for the guests customarily remained for several days. Mittelberger relates an interesting account of a rural funeral, although the lack of any observations of grief is very noticeable.²³ According to this traveler, when a death occurred in a rural family that was somewhat isolated, the four nearest neighbours were notified as to the death and time of burial. Each of these in turn notified their nearest neighbour who notified others, and thus it continued, so that when the time appointed for the burial service arrived, everyone within fifty miles knew of it and came if at all possible. If the treatment of the guests makes it seem more like a wedding or a house party than a funeral, it must be remembered that families, living miles apart, took advantage of every opportunity to visit neighbours, even though the occasion of their visit was not a happy one.

However that may be, according to Mittelberger, each person upon arrival was given cake and rum or cider. Then when all were assembled, some to be sure in not too sober a state, the body was carried to its final resting place, with the guests following on foot or on horseback. If the deceased person was a young man, the coffin was frequently borne by four young girls, while the body of a deceased maiden was often carried by four unmarried men. With the burial service completed, everyone returned to the house where a huge meal awaited them. Then began a round of activities which usually lasted for several days.

The weekly markets and the semiannual fairs also afforded them a great deal of pleasure;²⁴ for here farmers would meet from all parts of the province and exchange ideas as to the latest improvements in agriculture. Fairs, especially, if we may accept the remarks of Mary Valentine, were ideal occasions for romance. She notes that at a fair which she attended, "all young men and women that wants wives or husbands may be supplied."²⁵

Another bit of evidence which tends to prove that the farmer

²² *Ibid.*, XVI, 101.

²³ Mittelberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

²⁴ Arthur C. Bining, "The Iron Plantations of Early Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LVII (1933), 128-129; "Extracts from the Diary of Daniel Fisher, 1755," *Ibid.*, XVII (1893), 266-267.

²⁵ Mary Valentine to Robert Parke, 10th mo., 1725, *Ibid.*, V (1881), 350.

was not always engrossed with his wheat and cattle is to be found in the manuscript farm book of one Richard Buffington. Here, in the midst of scrupulous accounts of bushels of wheat grown, prices received, etc., is found a copy of a letter written to his "Peggy," in which he declares: "I would rather have my heart torn from my breast than it should harbor a wish for any other woman besides my Peggy."²⁶

Thus one might continue to enumerate activities which made up the social life of the farmer. But space will permit only the mention of such delightful diversions as the sleighing party of a winter's evening, the apple-butter boiling, the corn-huskings, all of which served to vary the monotony of rural life as it existed in the eighteenth century, and even today, with all of the conveniences to be found on most farms, these colonial diversions are not entirely forgotten nor ignored.

However, whether he was busy in his fields, or earnestly expressing his devotion to his beloved, the colonial Pennsylvania farmer's philosophy is very excellently set forth in two old sayings, which although brief, speak volumes of truth. First, "Pennsylvania is the heaven of farmers, the paradise of mechanics, and the hell of officials and preachers";²⁷ the second which also contained more than a germ of truth asserted, "Pennsylvania is the paradise of women, the purgatory of men, and the hell of horses."²⁸

²⁶ Richard Buffington, "Arithmetic and Farm Book," Cope Collection. (The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.)

²⁷ Mittelberger, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.