

New England Farming in the 1800s

The first half of the 19th century brought great change to agriculture in the United States. These changes were precipitated by the advancement of transportation in the way of railroads, canals, and turnpikes, opening up interstate commerce to include the vast new frontier of the west. In addition, this era saw marked improvement in obtaining and dispersing education and new information to improve agricultural efficiency. There was a tremendous growth in industry, triggered by a population boom and improved machinery.

While New England saw some farmers depart for greener pastures in the Midwest, many stayed and focused on improvement and expansion of their farms in order to transition from self-sustainable living to profitable farming. One of the greatest challenges for New England farmers at this time was the terrain. There was an ongoing battle to drain wetlands and remove rocks and boulders from their fields. Farmers started to recognize that it was more efficient to use their land for feeding and pasturing cows and sheep rather than cultivation, and therefore increased acreage dedicated to timothy hay and clover.

Those farmers who did maintain cultivated crops in New England began to focus on products that could not yet be transported long distances, as larger operations in the midwest and south were dominating markets for non-perishables through the expanding railroad network. This, along with increasing local demand for dairy products in New England mill towns, led to the first farms that specialized in dairy cows. Pig and poultry farms also started to emerge. Tomatoes, apples, onions, and potatoes became some of the more successful cultivated crops in the region. Tobacco, hops, beeswax, and lumber were some of the few non-perishable crops that were maintained in New England and exported regularly.

A. J. Downing:

There are, however, many of the finer and more perishable products of the garden and orchard which will not bear a long journey. These it should be the peculiar business of the cultivator of the older and less fertile soil in the seaboard states to grow.

Dairy Farm Medicine

The emergence of dairy farms throughout New England in the mid-19th century occurred at a time when the veterinary field was just beginning to find a voice in America. Dr. George Dadd, a British surgeon, published two important works entitled *The Cattle Doctor* (1851) and *The Modern Horse* (1854). For the most part, dairy farmers took it upon themselves to solve their own problems. However, there was a relatively high mortality rate in early dairy farms, as antibiotics were not yet invented and thus contagious disease not well-controlled. Respiratory disease during harsh New England winters was a common problem. Contagious bovine pleuropneumonia was identified in 1843 and led to the loss of many cattle in the following decades until its eradication in 1892. In addition, anesthetics were also not well-developed and surgical techniques were basic and crude. Breeding programs were rudimentary at best, but included Holsteins, Guernseys, Jerseys, and Ayrshires.

Sources:

www.historicnewengland.org

www.agclassroom.org

Agriculture in New England, by George Christie