



Unit 8: Changing Times on the Farm

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Section 1: Introduction

Farming has been important to New Hampshire for centuries. It was how people earned their living and supported their families. Farm life shaped the culture here. People organized their lives around the effort to raise crops and produce agricultural goods.

As you learn about farming in New Hampshire during this period, keep in mind the following questions:

- How has farming changed in New Hampshire from the colonial period to industrialization?
- How did the changes in farming from the 1600s to the 1900s reflect economic changes?
- How did changes on the farm change people's lives?



Section 2: The First Farmers

When did farming develop in New Hampshire?

For thousands of years, the people who lived on the land we call New Hampshire spent much of their time finding enough food to support themselves and their families. For a long time, that meant hunting animals and gathering plants that grew in the wild.

But 3,000 years ago, the Abenaki began growing their own food instead of just collecting what plants they could find or what animals they could hunt.

The Abenaki cleared away trees and rocks and planted seeds in the ground to grow vegetables they could eat. As the plants grew, the Abenaki made sure the plants had enough water to survive, and they kept weeds from growing up around the plant. When the plants grew big and produced vegetables, the Abenaki harvested them and ate them. They stored the leftover food to eat during the long winters.

The Abenaki grew three main types of crops: corn, beans, and squash. They grew them all together and called these crops the “three sisters.”

The corn grew straight up as a tall stalk. The beans grew as a vine and wrapped around the corn stalk. And the squash grew big leaves that were low to the ground and protected the corn and the beans from weeds or animals.

The Abenaki still hunted and fished for a lot of their food, and they still gathered berries, fruits, and other things that grew in the wild. But the crops they farmed helped them grow more food to support themselves.

The Abenaki worked as a community to grow their food. People didn’t have their own crops or their own farms. Instead, the community had one field where all the crops were grown together.



The whole community helped raise the crops, and then they all ate what the crops produced. This practice is called communal farming.

What are the challenges of farming in New Hampshire?

The Land and the Elements. Farming in New Hampshire was very hard. Many crops did not grow well in New Hampshire's rocky soil. And there were so many rocks! Anyone who wanted to farm in New Hampshire had to dig up hundreds or even thousands of rocks and move them out of the way to clear the fields for planting.

The growing season is also very short in New Hampshire compared to other places in America. Crops don't start growing in New Hampshire until May, which is when it finally warms up. But by October, it's pretty cold again, so crops don't grow well in the fall either. With a short growing season—only about 100 days—crops did not grow very big or produce very many fruits and vegetables.

Weather was a constant concern for people who farmed, as the conditions needed to be just right for things to grow. Too much water or not enough water could destroy crops. A windstorm or ice storm could damage the crops as well.

Because the crops might fail, people who farmed in New Hampshire learned to rely on other kinds of food, such as hunting, fishing, and gathering berries and other plants that grew in the wild.

Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. The First Farmers: The Abenaki began growing crops in New Hampshire 3,000 years ago.



2. The Three Sisters: The Abenaki grew squash, corn, and beans, which together are known as the Three Sisters.

3. Communal Farming: The Abenaki planted their crops as a community and worked together to grow the food they needed.

4. Farming and the New Hampshire Climate: New Hampshire has a short growing season, rocky soil, and unpredictable weather, which makes it hard to grow crops.



Section 3: Farming for the Family

What was farming like for the colonists who came to New Hampshire?

The first English settlers arrived in New Hampshire in 1623, when New Hampshire was a British colony. When they got here, they were interested in gathering New Hampshire's natural resources, shipping them back to Europe, and selling them. These settlers harvested mostly fish, beaver fur, and trees.

But the English settlers also needed food to survive. Almost all of them farmed the land, hunted animals, fished, and gathered fruit and nuts to eat.

The Abenaki taught the English settlers how to survive in New Hampshire, including which crops grew best here, like the "three sisters."

The first English settlers followed the same practice as the Abenaki and grew their crops as a community. But as their towns grew and became more settled, the colonists began claiming their own land to farm privately.

Farming involved everyone in the family. Men and older boys worked in the fields and with large animals like horses, cows, oxen, and sheep. Women and older girls took care of the house, sewed clothing, tended the garden, prepared all the food, and watched over the children. Even very young children had important jobs to do on a farm, such as taking care of small animals like chickens or helping their mothers around the house. Family farming replaced communal farming.

Farms in New Hampshire produced many goods.

There were fields of crops like wheat, rye, or corn.

There were orchards of apples and pears.



There were lots of farm animals which were used to produce meat, leather, and other goods like wool (from sheep) or eggs (from chickens).

Farm families had gardens to grow all kinds of vegetables, like squash, lettuce, cucumbers, and carrots.

Farmers also hunted and fished to provide food for their families.

They also gathered wild fruit and berries.

And they kept bee hives to produce honey and made maple syrup from tree sap.

Most farmers in New Hampshire produced enough to support their families and often had some goods left over to barter with their neighbors or sell at market.

Although it was a lot of work to farm in New Hampshire, farmers produced enough food for people to survive and for families to grow. This kind of farming is called self-sufficient farming because farm families could take care of themselves.

As their farms became settled and prosperous, farmers' houses got bigger.

Most farms started off with a small house but then added to it. Farm families who were doing well built a bigger house at the back of the small house or built a room that linked the house to the barn.

These types of buildings are called connected houses because the different parts of the house are connected together.

Farmers also spent a lot of their time cutting down wood. They needed lumber to build houses and barns and to make things like furniture, barrels, and wagons. They also needed wood to burn in their fireplaces and stoves to keep warm in the winter and to cook their food all year round.



The farmers also needed to keep trees out of their fields so the crops had room and enough sunlight to grow.

Most people had to chop wood everyday, which was a lot of work!

For many people, their lives were focused on their farms and their towns.

There were not very many roads in the colonial period, so it was hard to travel very far, and it took a long time to get anywhere. Most people spent their time with their own families or with other families who lived nearby.

The whole town came together for town meeting once or twice a year, and they came together for church services, which were held all day long on Sundays.

Farmers and their families lived their lives by the seasons and the sun. They woke up in the morning just as the sun came up, and at night, they often went to bed as soon as the sun went down, since they were tired from working on the farm all day. Also, they only had candles and oil lamps for light, so it was hard to see to read or sew at night.

In the summer, when there was lots of daylight, they stayed awake longer. But in the winter, when the days are short, they slept more hours of the day.

Their lives were very different in each season.

In the spring, farmers were busy planting crops and gardens.

In the summer, life slowed down a little bit. They still had to take care of what was growing in the fields, but it was less work than planting the crops.

Then in the fall, things got busy again, as they had to harvest the crops and get their farms ready for the winter. Once the harvest was in, life slowed



down in the winter, as they couldn't grow more crops until the spring. There were still chores that needed to be done on a farm all year round, like taking care of the animals, sewing clothing, cooking, and cleaning.

With so many farmers in New Hampshire during the 17th century, 18th century, and early 19th century, New Hampshire was very rural in this period. Most families owned lots of land for their farms.

Towns usually had 40 or 50 families, spread out across the entire town. They came together in the town center, which usually had a meeting house for the community for town meetings. The meeting house also served as the town's church and school. Town centers had cemeteries and usually a sawmill and a gristmill too. Larger towns might have a tavern or inn, but there weren't stores or restaurants like we have in towns today.

Farmers produced everything they needed or traded with their neighbors.

Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. Colonial Farmers: Almost everyone who lived in NH during the colonial period grew their own food on farms. These farms produced many different kinds of goods.
2. Family Farming: Each family owned its own farm during colonial times. All the family members worked on the farm, even the children.
3. Self-Sufficient Farming: Most colonial farms produced enough goods to support the families who lived there. As their farms prospered, colonial farmers built bigger houses.
4. Life Centered on Farming: Life in NH towns centered around farming since everyone lived on farms.



Section 4: Farming for the Market

How did farming change in the 19th century?

The way people farmed in New Hampshire began to change in the early 19th century. Farming was still done by families, but farms started to produce different kinds of goods than they had earlier.

Industrialization. This change in farming had to do with the way the New Hampshire economy started to shift at this time.

People started using the rivers in New Hampshire to power machines, and they put the machines into large buildings called factories or mills. The factories made goods faster with the machines than people could make them by hand.

The most important product made in factories was textiles. People use cloth for all sorts of things, like clothing and bedding. In early New Hampshire, though, there weren't stores where you could buy these things. Instead, families had to make these items themselves. Women did most of this work. They had to take the wool from sheep and turn it into clothing or other textile goods. Machines powered by water made it much faster to turn wool into thread and then weave the thread into cloth.

Video: Mason Explains: From Homemade to Machine-Made

Making Cloth by Hand and Machine. Before the Industrial Revolution, everything that people needed had to be made by hand. That included making all the cloth used for clothes and bedding! Join Mason on a trip back in time to learn how textiles used to be made by hand, and how the very first machines changed how they were made.



The Great Sheep Boom. As the machines began making textiles faster and faster, the factories needed more wool. The farmers of New Hampshire and Vermont changed the way they farmed so they could provide factories with the wool they needed.

Many farmers stopped growing crops like wheat, rye, and corn and turned their fields into pastures where they kept flocks of sheep.

To keep the sheep from wandering away, farmers built stone walls around their pasture lands. The walls were 3 or 4 feet high.

It was during these years that most of the stone walls in New Hampshire were built. In fact, you can still see many of these walls today all over the state, even up in the hills and mountains.

The stone walls are much lower today than they were back in the 19th century because the soil has built up around them.

In some parts of New Hampshire, farmers raised so many sheep that they didn't grow enough food to feed themselves anymore. Instead, they had to buy their food from stores and markets. Almost every farmer in the state kept a flock of sheep and sold the wool to the textile factories in the mid 19th century.

The Great Sheep Boom peaked in 1836 when there were half a million sheep living in New Hampshire. There were twice as many sheep as there were people!

After the 1830s, cloth made from cotton became more popular than cloth made from wool, so farmers in New Hampshire gradually stopped keeping so many sheep on their farms. The cotton was shipped from the southern states, where cotton was grown on big plantations by enslaved people.



Textile factories still used wool but not as much as they had in the 1830s and 1840s. The Great Sheep Boom was over by 1860, but most farmers in New Hampshire still kept small flocks of sheep and sold the wool to textile factories until the end of the 19th century.

Farming practices during the Great Sheep Boom were very different than they had been before. When a farm converted to sheep farming, the farmers stopped being self-sufficient. They no longer made or grew most of the things they needed.

Instead, they used the money they earned from selling wool to buy the things they needed. With more people buying things like food and clothing, more stores opened to meet the demand.

While the Great Sheep Boom was going on, railroads came to New Hampshire, which linked towns all over the state. The railroads gave farmers a way to sell their wool to factories far away from their farms.

Railroads also brought to rural communities food and goods that had come from somewhere else. All of these transactions were made with money, which was another way New Hampshire changed in the early 19th century. Instead of farmers trading with their neighbors for things they needed, they started using currency to buy what they needed.

The Great Sheep Boom meant that farmers were dependent on the economic market in a way they weren't before industrialization.

Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. Industrialization: In the 19th century, factories changed the way people made things and gave people a way to earn their living other than farming.



2. Making Textiles: Many NH factories created textiles, like cloth. Cloth was made out of cotton, which came from the South, or wool, which came from sheep that lived on New England farms.

3. The Great Sheep Boom: Most NH farmers stopped growing crops and instead began to raise flocks of sheep to produce wool for the factories.

4. Stone Walls: NH farmers built stone walls around pastures to keep the sheep on their land. Most of the stone walls in NH were built in the first half of the 19th century.



Section 5: The Decline of the New Hampshire Farm

Why did people leave their farms in the second half of the 19th century?

When the Great Sheep Boom ended in the late 1850, New Hampshire farmers tried to find new products they could make or grow to sell to people who did not live on farms. The 1850s were a hard time for farmers. Some of them gave up on farming and moved to cities so they could get jobs in the factories.

Then, in 1861, the Civil War broke out between the northern states and the southern states. Nearly 34,000 men from New Hampshire fought in the Civil War, and most of them had been farmers before they became soldiers.

When the war was over, the men came home, but many of them realized they didn't want to farm in New Hampshire anymore.

Some of them had seen other parts of the country during the war and realized that it might be easier to farm some place else, like the Midwest or the West. The soil conditions were better further west, and the growing season was longer there. In fact, farmers in the Midwest had started producing crops like wheat, rye, and corn and shipping them to the East by the railroad.

It was cheaper for people to buy these crops from Midwestern farms than it was to buy them from farms in New Hampshire, so Granite State farmers needed to find new products to grow and sell.

Other people in New Hampshire left farming altogether and got jobs in the cities as factory workers or laborers. For most people, life in the cities was more exciting than life in rural communities.



In the cities, there were lots of stores and restaurants. There were also theaters, parks, and other forms of entertainment. By the end of the 19th century, the cities also had electricity, which meant people could go out more easily at night and find fun things to do and see.

Fewer and fewer people were living in small New Hampshire towns. In a couple of towns, so few people lived there that the towns stopped being considered towns at all.

Although most people tried to sell their farms to someone else, many people just walked away from their farms when they moved elsewhere. In fact, the state of New Hampshire sold many abandoned farms to people from cities like Boston and New York who were looking for summer homes.

The deserted farms became vacation homes, which supported the growing tourist industry.

Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. End of the Great Sheep Boom: After the Great Sheep Boom ended, farmers needed to find other goods to produce and sell.
2. Farmers Move West: Some farmers moved to the Midwest or West where farming was easier.
3. Farmers Move to Cities: Many farmers took jobs in factories and moved to cities where life was more exciting.
4. Abandoned Farms: So many farms were abandoned in the late 19th century that people from Boston or New York started buying them as summer homes.



Section 6: Finding New Markets

How did rural life change in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

The people who stayed on the farms had to find new products to sell. Most farmers in New Hampshire started producing dairy products, like milk, cheese, and butter. Farmers used the railroads to send all these goods to cities, where the goods would be sold since people in the cities didn't produce their own food.

The railroads got the farmers' goods to market quickly, which was important. Dairy products go bad if they aren't kept cold, and they didn't have refrigerators in the 19th century and early 20th century. The only way to keep these goods fresh was to pack them in blocks of ice, but even then, the ice wouldn't keep the dairy products cold for very long. New Hampshire was close enough to Boston and New York to ship its dairy products there without them going bad.

New Hampshire farmers also produced other goods that had to be kept fresh, like fruits and vegetables. These crops grew well in New Hampshire's soil—things like apples, berries, lettuce, and potatoes. The Midwest was too far away from the big cities in the East to supply these goods. The fruits and vegetables would get old and stale if they were shipped that far.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century the other big product that came from New Hampshire was ice.

The lakes in New Hampshire freeze into ice in the winter. People harvested the ice by cutting it into blocks and then stored the blocks in ice houses that were designed to keep the ice frozen as long as possible—sometimes even to the end of the summer!



Since the refrigerator hadn't been invented yet, people kept their food cold in iceboxes, which were cabinets lined with metal. There was enough room inside the cabinets to store both food and a block of ice. After a short period of time, the block of ice melted, and people had to buy a new block to keep their food cold. There was a constant demand for ice.

For many decades, New Hampshire sold blocks of ice all over southern New England, especially in Massachusetts. The ice trade declined after the 1930s when people started buying refrigerators for their homes. Refrigerators use electricity to keep temperatures cold, so blocks of ice were no longer needed to preserve food.

All of these goods—dairy products, fruit, vegetables, and ice—helped New Hampshire farmers survive in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Most of these goods made farmers enough money to feed their families, but they didn't earn much profit.

Agricultural Clubs and Fairs. To make rural life more fun and social, farm communities started organizing clubs in the late 19th century.

The New Hampshire Grange was formed in Exeter in 1873. This group spoke out for more services in rural communities, like mail. The Post Office did not always bring mail to people who lived in the country. Instead, people had to come into the post office to pick up their mail.

Rural free mail delivery began in the late 19th century, thanks to the efforts of the Grange. This service brought mail right to people's homes, even if they lived far away from a city or town center. The Grange also helped farmers share new ideas about farming and learn about new technology that made farming easier.

The 4-H Club was a popular organization in New Hampshire. This group began in 1902 and encouraged young people to become interested in farming, agriculture, and raising livestock. 4-H encouraged future generations of farmers to stay in rural communities.



These clubs made farming more social. People would come together to discuss their farming practices but also to visit, share stories, and make friends. Sometimes groups like these held lectures, dances, or agricultural fairs. In fact, in 1886 the Grange organized the first state fair in New Hampshire, which was held in Tilton.

State fairs had all sorts of interesting things for people to look at and do, like competitions for who could grow the best or biggest plants and who could raise the strongest or most beautiful sheep, cows, horses, or pigs. There were usually performances or games, lots of food, and other attractions to keep people entertained.

Nowadays, agricultural fairs are held in New Hampshire's counties, but they are much like the state fairs held in the 19th century.

An Agricultural College. New Hampshire opened its first agricultural college in 1866. It was called the New Hampshire College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts, and it was part of Dartmouth College in Hanover.

Agricultural colleges taught young people about the science of farming—things like soil conditions, the effects of weather, and good farming practices. In 1893, the college moved to Durham. In 1923, it changed its name to the University of New Hampshire.

Now, the University of New Hampshire teaches all sorts of subjects, but when it started, it focused on agriculture and farming.

Old Home Week. Another way to promote farm life in New Hampshire's towns was Old Home Week, which was started in 1899 by Governor Frank Rollins. He wanted local communities to hold celebrations in their towns, with dinners, picnics, parades, concerts, and games. These festivals promoted rural life and state patriotism.



Governor Rollins hoped that some of the people who had moved away from their farms would come back to celebrate Old Home Week with their old friends and neighbors. When these people came and visited, they might even donate money to help the town build a library or a park.

Old Home Week was very popular in New Hampshire for about 20 years, and many towns celebrated it. These community festivals became popular again in the late 20th century as Old Home Days.

New Hampshire farms still struggled for most of the 20th century. It wasn't until the late 20th century and early 21st century that farming became popular again when people became interested in picking their own fruit, like apples, blueberries, and strawberries.

Many people also became interested in buying their food directly from farms in the early 21st century, instead of buying it at stores. And restaurants became interested in working with farmers to bring food straight from the farms to their customers. This movement is called farm-to-table because the food is fresh from the farm and doesn't go to a market first.

Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. **New Products:** In the late 19th century, NH farms began to focus on producing goods that needed to be kept cold, like dairy products and fruits and vegetables. These goods were sold in big cities in the East like Boston and New York.
2. **Ice Harvesting:** Before refrigerators were invented in the middle of the 20th century, NH produced blocks of ice that were sold all over the East. People used the ice to keep their food cold.



3. Making Farm Life More Fun: People tried to find ways to make farm life more exciting. They formed clubs, organized fairs, and started holding Old Home Weeks to give farmers ways to be more social.

4. Farming Today: Farming became popular again in NH in the late 20th century. Now NH farms produce food for restaurants and grocery stores. They also allow people to pick their own food, like apples and berries, and sometimes run stores to sell their goods.