



FARMING HERITAGE IN THE CUMBERLAND VALLEY



The earliest farmers in the Cumberland Valley practiced primitive farming up to 3,000 years ago. These early Native Americans preceded the later arriving Shawnee who inhabited the Valley as early as the late 1600s. The Shawnees would have farmed very small plots of land using the "slash and burn" technique, clearing a small plot of land, planting it for a number of years before moving to a new area. They often planted the "three sisters" – corn, squash and beans, and they shared their crop knowledge with the newly arriving European settlers. Crops introduced to farmers by the Indians, such as corn, became staple products in the Valley.



Woman hoeing corn with bone blade attached to handle. Print: F. N. Wilson

Early Scots-Irish settlers (early 1700s) began to clear larger fields. Their access to iron tools was of tremendous advantage in clearing the land and planting. They also had large domesticated farm animals for power to work the land. German settlers who followed used farming techniques which better maintained the productivity of the soil. Wheat and corn became principle crops in the valley. As early as the 1750s, most fertile land in the county was being farmed.



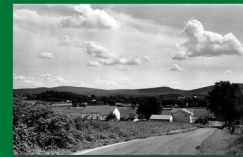
Harvest view on a farm near Carlisle. Photo by Ivan Carter.

The introduction of McCormick's reaper (early 1800s) for harvesting grain made a major impact in the Valley. The horse-drawn mechanical grain reaper greatly increased the ability of farmers to work larger wheat fields. Farms in the Valley were known nationally and in Europe for the quality of their wheat flour.

Horse-drawn threshing machine on the Henry farm in North Middleton Township, operated by George Henry, his wife Emma, and their daughter Ellen Henry, c. 1920.

The number of farms and total area cultivated reached a peak in the 1880s—213,542 farms totaling 19,741,341 acres! This number has been in decline ever since. As of 2017 there were 1,260 farms in the Cumberland Valley utilizing 169,654 acres of land.

View of the South Mountain from a ridge near Keeneytown on the Petersburg Road in South Middleton Township, August 11, 1967. Photo by Jim Bradley.



In the late 1700s farmers started to establish herds of cattle, and the cast iron plow came into use.



"Turning the rich earth" A Mennonite farmer, member of the Shirk family, plows a field at the intersection of Quarry Hill Road and McCulloch Road in Penn Township. Photo by Jim Bradley.

During the Revolutionary War, Pennsylvania became known as the breadbasket of the nation. One of the state's most productive regions was the Cumberland Valley. Up to 90% of the Valley's population was engaged, in one way or another, in agriculture. This was a time when a family worked a farm, and every member of the family helped out with the chores.



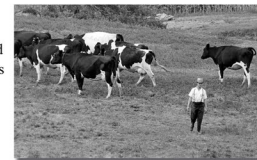
Young girl with goats on a local farm, c. 1910.

Agriculture and related enterprises remain Pennsylvania's largest industry!



Photo by Marilyn Bislinc.

Beginning in the late 1900s, raising poultry, fruit growing and the rise of the dairy industry lessened Pennsylvania farmers' reliance on the staple grains of wheat and corn.



A Mennonite farmer with his cows as the cows move from the pasture to the barn, c. 1973. Photo by Jim Bradley.

Many Cumberland Valley farms today are multi-generational family farms with descendants of earlier settlers continuously maintaining and improving the land.



The land beyond this sign has been farmed by the McCullough family since 1863. Pictured in front of their tractor are three generations currently working the land - Mason, Denny, and Gary McCullough. Photo credit: Deb Ickes Photography.



Sign funded by a grant from Harrisburg Bicycle Club



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