

Greene County

MAGAZINE

A Farm Journal



GREENE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME 7 1990

(pages 31 -41)

A FARM JOURNAL

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The Greene County Historical Society has obtained a copy of a farm journal kept by Minor Shotwell of Ruckersville, Virginia, from January 1, 1858

through February 25, 1861.³ Since the log does not name its author, assumptions are necessary. Jeremiah Shotwell, father of Minor, lived until 1864 and continued to own 222 acres of land. It is possible that he could have written the journal; however, page 77 of the journal contains notes unrelated to the journal but dated 1867 and 1868, well after the death of Jeremiah. At the time of the journal Minor Shotwell was 38 years of age and owned 95 acres of his own land. It seems likely that he was now managing a plantation of about 317 acres just south of

³The journal is contained in a notebook of 78 lined pages 6 1/2"X 8", with marbled covers. It remains in the possession of Mrs. Lucinda Sims, great-granddaughter of Minor Shotwell, who now lives at Strawberry Hills.

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Ruckersville.² In that case the "extended family" (a modern term) living in and around Strawberry Hills, the family home, would have included Jeremiah Shotwell and his wife, Sarah; Minor Shotwell and his wife, Elizabeth; their children, Ellis Franklin Shotwell, Irene, Amalia and Lula; and at least nine slaves.

We know the names of nine slaves because they are entered in the journal:

- | | |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| ABRAM | Probably elderly, frequently ill, often works with women. |
| BETSY | Gives birth to a male child. |

² Minor Shotwell's purchase of 95 acres from Elisha Williams on September 18, 1863, is recorded in Deed Book 4, page 315 at the Greene County Clerk's Office. Will Book 2, page 52 (also at the Clerk's Office) contains instructions for the disposal of Jeremiah Shotwell's property. Following these instructions after the death of Jeremiah's wife, Ira Wood, Trustee, sold Jeremiah's land, consisting of the upper or old tract of 120 acres and the lower tract of 102 acres, to John R. Smith on September 4, 1881. This is recorded in Deed Book 6, pages 399 and 789 and 799, at the clerk's office.

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CHEYNY (or Chaney or Chany) Frequently ill, dies
of typhoid.

HENRY Ill several days.

ISAAC Ill for extended periods.

JOE Cut hand badly while chopping wood.

JESSE Laid up once with cold.

JINNEY Laid up once with cold.

JOHN Drives a team.

There may, of course, have been others
unmentioned in the journal.

The journal names seven cultivated areas:
Henderson Hollow, Walnut Mountain, new ground (ground
in the process of being cleared), field #1, farm
field, plant beds (these beds for starting tobacco
plants were probably simply parts of other fields),
and gardens for the house and the quarters.
Unfortunately we cannot satisfy our curiosity by
finding any of these areas.

Tobacco was undoubtedly the most important crop
raised on the plantation. In 1859, at least four

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hogsheads of tobacco were sent to the depot for shipping. The income had to be good: for growing tobacco was awesomely labor-intensive. During one of every three work days, slaves were working in tobacco. The journal chronicles the tasks: preparing the tobacco lands and seeding beds; transferring the plants; hoeing, hilling and replanting; topping, suckering and worming; cutting, housing and drying; stripping the leaves, grading (the journal says, "prizeing") and shipping. And almost all this work was done by hand.

On June 5, 1859, the journal records, "set out now about 50,000 plants in Henderson Hollow." Today that would indicate about ten acres of tobacco. If so in that day, we still do not know the entire acreage; for tobacco was planted on Walnut Mountain, in the new ground and in field #1 also. The journal is frustratingly silent about the number of plants or the acreage.

Corn was likely the crop of next importance. It,

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too, required an impressive amount of labor; planting hoeing, cutting, shucking, shelling some, pulling fodder and stacking. Corn required almost as much work as tobacco since there were 234 barrels of good corn and 100 barrels of short corn (poor ears ?). Today this amount could be raised on 15 to 20 acres; but it probably required 50 to 60 acres at that time.

By comparison, wheat and oats were simple crops to grow. The journal never gives the exact number of people who worked at a task, but it would appear that neither crop required more than a third the time and effort required for tobacco or corn. However, one year 87 bushels of oats were sown. Today that would translate into 35 acres, and enough wheat was grown so that for January 13, 1861, we read, "halling wheat to the depot today."

Clover, the hay crop, required relatively little work; but we are given no idea of the number of acres.

Both hogs and sheep were raised. Hogs were

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butchered and we read of a box of hams being sent to the depot. The sheep were sheared, but we are never told what happened to the wool.

There were gardens for both the house and the slave quarters large enough to permit digging of potatoes for the winter and the putting away of cabbage.

Aside from being a source for fencing, timber for plantation use and firewood, the woodlands could provide occasional cash. The journal records hauling bark (probably for tanning) and "spoke wood."

The first year of this journal appears to have been exceptional. Aside from the vagaries of the weather, which forces annual changes in the schedule of planting, cultivating and harvesting crops, this was the year of big projects. During 23 days of January and February 1859, slaves were "cutting in the new ground." During 10 days in March they were rolling logs, piling brush and burning log heaps. In April they spent seven days raking and burning leaves

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--cleaning up. Later in April and into May they were "coltering" (cutting into the soil without turning it), grubbing and piling rocks. Given that tobacco soon wore out the soil, some clearing probably continued year by year. On February 3, 1860, we read "...balance hands in new ground commenced enlargen it until the weather opens for other business." But the journal does not indicate a great amount of clearing.

Perhaps the fences had been allowed to get into a state of disrepair. Some slaves were splitting rails on 18 days during February and March of 1859. (They apparently spent four or five days doing this in each of the next two years.) Then they proceeded to build or repair fences around the cornfield on Walnut Mountain and the new ground. And early in April they were "doing up fences on Turkey Pass Road."

It is no surprise to realize that citizens were expected to help with the upkeep of the public roads. On April 29, 1859, (and again the next year) we read, "All hands at work on public road." however there were

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lanes or roads to keep up on the plantation as well, and in April, 1860, all hands worked six days making a road "up Henderson Hollow." All went well, for on April 30 we read "completed road today and hauled a load of wood along the same a better than I expected to get at first."

We know that Strawberry Hills has been altered quite extensively, and on several occasions, during its existence. Perhaps one of those times was 1859. It is certain that the work was being done in the quarters. A number of times the team was sent to haul timber from the mill -- one time specifically for quarters. Twice, early, in April the team hauled brick from Barboursville. As early as February 1, stone was hauled for quarters. More was hauled in April. On April 2 the journal reads, "Waiting for stone mason." This may be some sort of record for waiting for workmen; but more likely it involved building and renovating several buildings on the plantation. Much of the work was done in the first

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year of the journal. One is tempted to suggest that the first year of the journal was the year Minor Shotwell took over management of the plantation from an aging father who shortly wrote his will. Of course we can never know this.

As with farming in all times, the journal shows constant awareness of the weather. We probably could check the journal against old records of rainfall, but, when we read of making a pit and hauling ice, we wonder about comparative temperatures between then and now. True, if there were no pond, they had developed a method of damming a run to slow the flow and permit freezing; but an extended period of cold is necessary to form ice for cutting and storing. There are no records of temperature from those days. Life and health were important too. The journal records it. "Abram is ill for an extended period. He may well be elderly; but he can work repairing shoes and is often given work with the women. Betsy is allowed to leave off working a couple of days before she gives birth to

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a male child." Cheney apparently is in poor health; she becomes ill with typhoid fever and dies. The next day (May 2, 1860) reads, "Rain again today digging grave and burying the dead. Crynolyne foaled today with a mare colt by ^Red Eye."

No work worth commenting on is done on Sunday; and "hands" are given an occasional day at liberty. Thanksgiving passes without remark; but Christmas includes several liberty days. One time, hands are allowed to go to an "interesting" meeting down by Predy's Run (only a short distance).

Our journalist would not have imagined that 130 years later some curious soul would read his jottings. If he had, he still would not have explained "prizeing" (grading) tobacco, "fallowing" (plowing) corn, "mallng" (splitting) rails, coltering the ground, "cockling" (perhaps dragging) the wheat land. His concerns were for everyday plantation work which included scattering the manure (one time it was scattered around the apple trees). Then towards fall

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and winter his concern turned to digging potatoes, getting fire wood and "chinking up the quarters."

One hundred and thirty years from now some curious soul will wonder how and why similar things were done today.