

Historical Content Agriculture and Industry in Colonial and Early Virginia (up to 1850)

Before the arrival of European colonists, Native Americans had established successful agricultural practices in Virginia. It is believed that Native Americans developed agricultural practices over time. At first, harvesting naturally occurring wild plants; then, nurturing preferred plants over non-preferred plants, which was an early stage of **cultivation**; and eventually, developing successful systems of purposefully planting, cultivating, and harvesting a variety of plants.

As more European colonists arrived in Virginia, their increasing desire for farm land motivated them to push Native Americans further and further west. The landowners in the Virginia colony also needed a lot of laborers to clear and farm growing land holdings. In Virginia, the earliest British colonists arrived with white indentured servants to perform farm labor. Indentured servants usually served as laborers for seven years before they were released from their servitude. At that point, they could labor for others for pay or start their own small farm. Therefore, large landowners continued to import new indentured servants to replace those who had completed their service.

When Africans, who were forced from their homes and brought to America by slave traders, first arrived in Virginia in the early 1600s, they were treated as indentured servants and given their freedom at the end of their servitude. During the 1700s, some colonists decided to change the practice from indentured servitude of Africans to a system of lifelong servitude, or slavery. This practice of enslavement became hereditary, meaning if you were born to an enslaved person, you were also a slave. It was also a racially based system of enslavement with only black or mixed race people being enslaved. The racial and hereditary nature of slavery in the British colonies, some of which became the United States, set it apart from slavery practices in other places and time periods.

Tobacco **monoculture** was established from the earliest days of the English colony in Virginia and remained popular in the Eastern half of the state throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Under tobacco monoculture farming, farms grew mostly tobacco as a **cash crop** and also grew small amounts of wheat, corn, vegetables, and other crops for home consumption. Corn was important not only for human consumption but also for animal feed. Corn was also ground into meal and flour to make bread. Husks could be used for many purposes including mattress stuffing. Other crops for home consumption included beans, peas, carrots, cabbage, and herbs such as parsley, rosemary, chamomile, and spearmint for eating and for medicinal purposes. If they were able, farmers would grow crops for sale, typically tobacco and later wheat. An average farm family produced most of what they needed to survive on their farm but they also traded for some items such as salt and sugar or services such as grinding their grain.

Early settlers lived in a one-story, one or two bedroom small wooden house with a chimney. If there was a loft (attic room) it was used for storage and/or sleeping. The hearth was used for light, warmth, and for cooking meals unless they had a separate kitchen building. They might have one or two outbuildings including a kitchen, dairy, tobacco barn, etc. Enslaved people may have lived in these outbuildings or in a separate cabin.

During the first half of the 19th century (1800-1850), farmers diversified and adopted more varied farming practices. Tobacco prices were declining and much of the soil in the area had been depleted from years of tobacco farming. Wheat and livestock became important to local farming in the Piedmont region. This new system of agriculture required less labor than tobacco farming. However, some farmers, especially large landowners, still owned slaves and used them to farm their properties or rented the enslaved people out to others as labor. Slavery was an established institution that many powerful people did not want to see end. The further west you went in the state, the smaller farmsteads became and the less slavery was prevalent.

Western areas also tended to practice other types of agriculture and industry including harvesting timber and natural minerals. Iron was abundant, especially in western Virginia. Virginia was an early source of iron but eventually other states like Pennsylvania outpaced it. In Virginia, the majority of workers at forges, furnaces, and ironworks were enslaved people. Most were unskilled laborers, but some held skilled labor positions.

In the 1830s, railroads arrived in Virginia. Railroads made it easier for farmers to get their crops to market and helped grow the popularity of wheat, livestock, dairy, fruit, and other farm products. The Louisa Railroad was chartered in 1836 and reached Gordonsville by 1840. It was renamed the Virginia Central Railroad in 1850. It traveled from Richmond westward over 200 miles to Covington. It was connected to other railroads and therefore connected many areas across the state and region. In 1886, Virginia Central Railroad and the Covington and Ohio Railroad were merged to form the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. Today, CSX (the successor of the C&O Railroad), Amtrak, and the Buckingham Branch Railroad still use portions of the old Virginia Central Railroad line.

Today, agriculture is Virginia's largest private industry by far. The industry has an economic impact of \$70 billion annually and provides more than 334,000 jobs in the Commonwealth.

Farm Facts

- Virginia has 43,225 farms.
- The typical Virginia farmer is 58.5 years old.
- The average farm size is 181 acres.
- Farms cover 7.8 million acres.
- Approximately 36 percent of Virginia's primary farm operators are female.
- Less than 15 cents of every consumer dollar spent on food actually goes to the farmer

Key Words

Cultivation - the act of caring for or raising plants. The word cultivation is most often used to talk about the ways that farmers take care of crops.

Monoculture - the cultivation of a single crop in a given area.

Cash crop - a crop produced for its commercial value rather than for use by the grower.

Visuals



Photo Credit: National Park Service