

250th Anniversary Publications

From the Start, Farming Drove Area Economy

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The first business of the early settlers of Cumberland County was to clear the land and set about raising food for themselves, their families, horses, cows, and other stock.

People planted crops among whatever trees they didn't use for building homes and fences. The means for tilling soil were crude: the plows were wooden, the teams were usually oxen, and plowing was hardly more than scratching the surface.

Many newcomers were attracted by the fertile ground along the rivers. Diking the arable land in the flood plain meant not having to clear the ground first -- a process that was lengthy and arduous.

Marshes were diked and salt hay was grown. The land was farmed until it was exhausted, then more ground was cleared and the cycle began again.

Gradually, iron plows replaced wooden ones, horses replaced oxen, and new methods and tools were introduced. As farming methods improved, farmers could keep more livestock.

Wheat, corn, rye, white and sweet potatoes, hay, tomatoes, and fruit were cultivated. The region also abounded with farms devoted to growing strawberries, blackberries, pears, peaches, apples, and other fruit. Farmers raised dairy cows, pigs, and poultry.

Decades later, in 1912, Charles "C.F." Seabrook established Seabrook Farms, and eventually had more than 19,000 acres under production. The food processing industry grew up around the agricultural industry, and Cumberland County firms soon were sending the canned and jarred fruits of local fields to every corner of the world.

After the American Revolution, growing cities such as Philadelphia and New York demanded timber. Cutting and hauling lumber to wharves along the various navigable streams became important.

Cumberland County had great stands of white, black, and red oak, hickory, chestnut and pine, and the swampy lands along the stream banks were covered with cedar.

The first lumber mills were erected between 1700 and 1725. Tar and pitch were extracted for shipbuilding. Charcoal was used to fire kilns and furnaces.

In Maurice River Township, oak poles were steamed and fashioned into barrel hoops. Roots of holly, laurel, dogwood, scrub oak, and magnolia were dug, shortened, steamed, and made into umbrella handles. Hickory was the wood of choice for wagon works and for smoking hams.

The shingle industry depended on cedars blown down by storms and covered up by mud. This industry was big in Port Norris, Mauricetown, Dennisville, and Buckshutem. A second roof installed on Independence Hall in Philadelphia was made of shingles cut at Dennisville.

The Yock Wock Swamp, between Mauricetown and Port Norris, was a cedar swamp centuries ago. The Indians recorded a great storm in 1637 that knocked down most of the trees, leaving their tops pointing southwest.

Bog iron was found in wet, marshy areas, and brought to the furnaces by scow and wagon. Waterpower supplied the blast used to smelt the ore, and the furnaces operated 24 hours a day, blowing in March and remaining in blast until ice formed on the streams, preventing the water wheel from turning. The founder was responsible for the operation of the furnace, and the men worked in shifts.

In 1810, Eli Budd purchased land near Port Elizabeth and built a forge to manufacture iron. Forges were usually located near furnaces, and the hammering of 500-pound hammers on 1,000-pound plates could be heard for miles. The men worked at night by firelight or whale-oil lanterns hung on poles. Cemetery head and foot stones made of iron were cast at Budd's Forge.

A salt works was located at Riggins Ditch about a mile inland from Delaware Bay. Salt water flowed into large copper pans. The water was boiled and the salt filtered out. During the War of 1812, the operation was moved to Port Elizabeth because the owners were afraid the British would destroy the pans.

Wherever there was a meeting house, there usually was a tavern. At that time, only sober men of good judgment could obtain a license, without which customers could not be charged for lodging. Taverns were the place where men went to drink, get the day's news, pay taxes, and see traveling shows.

Taverns had ample facilities for feeding man and beast. No liquor was sold after 9 p.m., and drunkards were sentenced to five hours in the stocks. In early days, when houses were far apart, travelers welcomed the sight of candles gleaming through tavern windows.

Cumberland County also had plentiful deposits of fine silica sand, ideally suited for glassmaking. Around 1795, James Lee bought land in Port Elizabeth and established the Eagle Glass Works for the manufacture of window glass and hollow ware. In 1806, he established another glass-making plant in Millville.

Fishing and boat-building have been associated with the coast since the days of the Leni Lenape.

In 1789, Port Elizabeth became a port of delivery. With Bridgeton as a port of entry, trade was carried on with the West Indies, and the river was navigable for vassals up to 120 tons.

Ships carried Cumberland County agricultural goods to ports around the country. There was a thriving oyster trade in the Delaware Bay. Shad, sturgeon, and crab were part of the fishing industry.

The Port Elizabeth Manufacturing Company was established in 1837 for the purpose of making cotton, wood silk, and printed and dyed cotton fabrics.

John Ogden, an early settler of Port Norris, established a boatyard at a place known as Elder Point for the repair of whaling ships. The shop operated through the War of 1812 and was still open in 1889.

Nathan Shaw opened a blacksmith shop near the shipyard. Several generations of the family made iron fittings for the vessels that were built and repaired in the shipyards.

Around 1953, another shipbuilding plant in which large ocean-going vessels (over 1,000 tons) were built was established by Nathan Baner and William Champion. This was the foundation of the Dorchester Shipbuilding Corp. During the years 1921-31, they were very active in building oyster boats, and during World War II, they were busy constructing vessels for the government.

During the 1800s, an important commercial fishery was based on the Atlantic Sturgeon. The New Jersey Southern Railroad, which extended across Cumberland County, led to the establishment of a fishing port known as Caviar. Roe from the sturgeon was processed and exported until the industry declined in the early 1900s.

The year 1888 saw the establishment of the Vineland Board of Trade (now the Vineland Chamber of Commerce) to serve local business and industry. It now boasts the largest business membership of any municipality-based Chamber of Commerce in the state.

In 1889, Michael Dilks moved to Dividing Creek to operate a sawmill for his father. He conceived the idea of manufacturing baskets from gum timber. He purchased a lathe, the first one to come into New Jersey, and began

manufacturing baskets. He hired 16 basket-makers with a set goal of producing 200,000 baskets per year. By 1919, the Dilks Basket Factory employed 52 men and produced three quarters of a million baskets.

In 1922, James T. McNaney of Maryland opened an oyster-shucking house in South Port Norris. Before 1923, oysters were shipped in the shell left Bivalve and Maurice River every day.

Today, the region's contribution to the world markets is still surprisingly diverse, and it involves companies both large and small, privately-owned and publicly traded.

As the Year 2000 approaches, issues for local businesses include how to make the best use of talent, how best to prepare workers to enter the workforce, and how to keep abreast the evolving technology.

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