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325 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT STOW

In the 19th Century, hay was an important crop for Stow farmers. Here, workers load a hay wagon at Beede's Farm – now the site of Honey Pot Hill Orchards.



25 FARM THINGS

1. Outside centers like Boston and Salem, farming in 17th Century Massachusetts was a nearly universal occupation. The men and women who settled new regions might build gristmills, sawmills and blacksmith shops, but they – and almost everyone else, including the minister – were involved in agriculture.
2. Chartering towns was tied to properties granted to groups of farmers. In Stow's case, its 1683 incorporation involved a dozen landholders (including the future, still-unappointed minister), each initially assigned 50 acres.
3. None of the 1683 farms have survived in the families of their original landholders. However, Stow's Pilot Grove Farm is still owned by descendants of Abijah Warren, who purchased it in 1782.
4. Working the land required bodies to clear forests and plow fields, and New England farmers produced large families. But over generations, as farms were divided among multiple children, they tended to shrink in size – and sustainability. Finding more property in other areas was always a concern.
5. In 1775, some 30 Stow families left for land grants in southern Maine, establishing the town of Waterford.
6. Sometimes, farmers acquired additional properties elsewhere while maintaining their land in

Farm Things - continued

Stow. In 1820, Abijah Warren bought 50 acres in Princeton and each spring drove his stock over the roads to summer pasturage, returning them in the fall. Subsequent Pilot Grove generations continued this practice into the 1920s, when motor vehicle traffic finally made it impractical.

7. Through the 1700s, New England farms largely produced goods for their own consumption, planting crops like corn, wheat, rye, hops, potatoes and garden vegetables and maintaining small herds of cattle, sheep and pigs. Also, most likely, two oxen and a horse.

8. Gender roles were strong, with men focusing on field work and women on gardening and tending barnyard livestock, cooking, making candles and soap and manufacturing clothing – that is, “homespun.” However, everyone generally took part in the urgent activity of haying.



Stone walls that once marked the edges of open fields today often stretch through regrown woods.

9. Things changed over the course of the 1800s. Wheat and hops largely disappeared from Stow farms due to competition from western regions. And most farms had small orchards of fruit trees.

10. Mechanical reapers were invented in 1834 – with one apparently in use in Stow as early as 1843. Hay became a significant cash crop for Stow farmers, hauled to Boston for sale at...Haymarket Square.

11. Hay was so important to Stow that from 1871 to 1930 the town maintained an immense scale in front of Town Hall for farmers to weigh their wagonloads of hay before taking them to sale.

12. By 1870, Stow counted 151 farms within its borders. The town, like most of central Massachusetts, was predominately cleared farmland – so open that sea captains bringing their ships into Boston Harbor were said to use the towering pine trees atop Pilot Grove Hill as navigation guides.

13. About 20 percent of the land was left as wooded areas that supported farms’ fuel needs. And, eventually, firewood came to provide a lucrative winter product for farmers to sell to urban areas.

14. From 1873 to 1891, Stow and Gleasondale each had a Farmer’s and Mechanics Club. The Stow Grange was organized in 1877, remaining active until 1983. With its emphasis on families and young people, the Grange became an important social factor in the community.

15. After the railroads came to the region in the mid-1800s, area farmers had new, efficient ways

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to transport goods to market in Boston, especially milk, firewood and garden produce.

16. Mechanization began to displace draft animals. By the late-1800s, there were steam-powered tractors, by 1910, gas-powered tractors

17. At least on big operations. Horses and mules were important work animals on many farms through the 1960s.

18. With each improvement in transportation and farm technology, competition from other regions increased. Productivity grew (more food could be grown by fewer farmers) but the costs involved (like tractors that increased that productivity) favored larger farms. The viability of small working farms declined. By 1933, the number of farms in Stow was down to 22.

19. Some farmers adapted by specializing. Dairy farming became significant. In 1902, Stow counted as many cows as people – some 1,000 human beings and 1,026 cows. Multiple dairies supplied milk and butter to both Stow and urban areas. For a while, there was a cheese factory in Acton.

20. Following World War I, poultry farming expanded. Over the first half of the century, Stow boasted at least a dozen poultry farms. In 1950, town records reported 30,430 chickens and ducks raised in the town. A poultry farm store was located at the site of the present Stow Shopping Plaza.

21. But around 1950, Stow began its long transformation into a suburban bedroom community. By 1974, only two dairy farms remained in the town. By 1983, none.

22. Today, three commercial produce farms and five orchards are mixed in among Stow's house lots, subdivisions, conservation lands and golf courses.

23. As a rural/suburban community, Stow also has a number of "hobby farms" whose owners raise crops or livestock – but not as commercial operations.

24. Of Stow's working farms, Applefield Farm cultivates 25 acres of land devoted to vegetables and flowers on Great Road and Tuttle Lane. Small Farm plants about four-and-a-half acres of vegetables and flowers on Gleasondale Road. Sauta Farms cultivates a range of vegetables on three acres on Hudson Road and three in Hudson.

25. Small Farm and Sauta Farm sell their produce to local residents through their farm stands. So does Applefield Farm, but it sends about a quarter of its production to restaurants and health food stores as far away as Jamaica Plain.