



Agriculture on Aquidneck Island

1638 to World War II

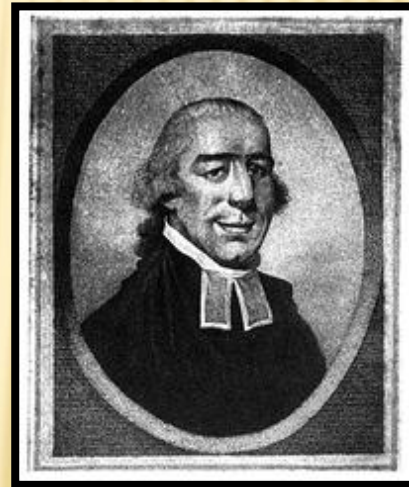
An Historical Perspective

by

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The Founding
Portsmouth was
founded in 1638 and
Newport a year later.

The first settlers on
Aquidneck Island were
led by William
Coddington, the
Reverend John Clarke
and Ann Hutchinson.



Were the first settlers farmers?

Not completely the case. Most were farmers...after all most British colonial settlers were, in fact, forced to be engaged in agriculture, and in subsistence farming in particular.

Subsistence farming: grow enough crops to feed one's family for the year and then start over again.

The alternative was:

Commercial farming: which was to do specialized farming in one or two crops. Sell the produce and then buy food for the family.

The first big project for the first settlers was to clear the land. Much of this island was forested and required cutting trees and removing stumps. This was very difficult and labor-intensive work.

They were faced with a difficult transition from wilderness into “a productive rural society.” (Bridenbaugh)

It was simply a matter of survival.

Portsmouth was settled by a group of dissidents who had been banished from Massachusetts Bay because of their challenging of the religious leaders of that colony....that's another story

Very soon after the first settlement (in 1639) seven of the Portsmouth settlers, led by Coddington, moved further south on the island to establish Newport.

Why?

They saw that Newport had an excellent natural harbor and many of these men were businessmen looking for a profit. They intended to establish an “agricultural-commercial experiment” on Aquidneck Island. They viewed agriculture produce as a means to a profit, if not a fortune.

“The unqualified success of agriculture...throughout the 17th century resulted not so much from the collective effort of many pioneer families, each toiling away on a few cleared acres to produce every year a tiny marketable surplus, as from the accomplishment of a few gentlemen who, investing large sums of money for that time and place, created in New England a species of landed estates....” (Bridenbaugh)

Soon after the first settlement, large farms were laid out in Portsmouth with every freeman getting a 2-acre house lot in the area around the Cove and as much as 200 acres of farmland further south. In Newport large estates were also set out. William Brenton, for example acquired what he called Hammersmith Farm, an estate of 574 acres. All of the other first settlers received large grants of land as well.

Very early on, livestock farming (a less intensive type of farming) became popular as well.

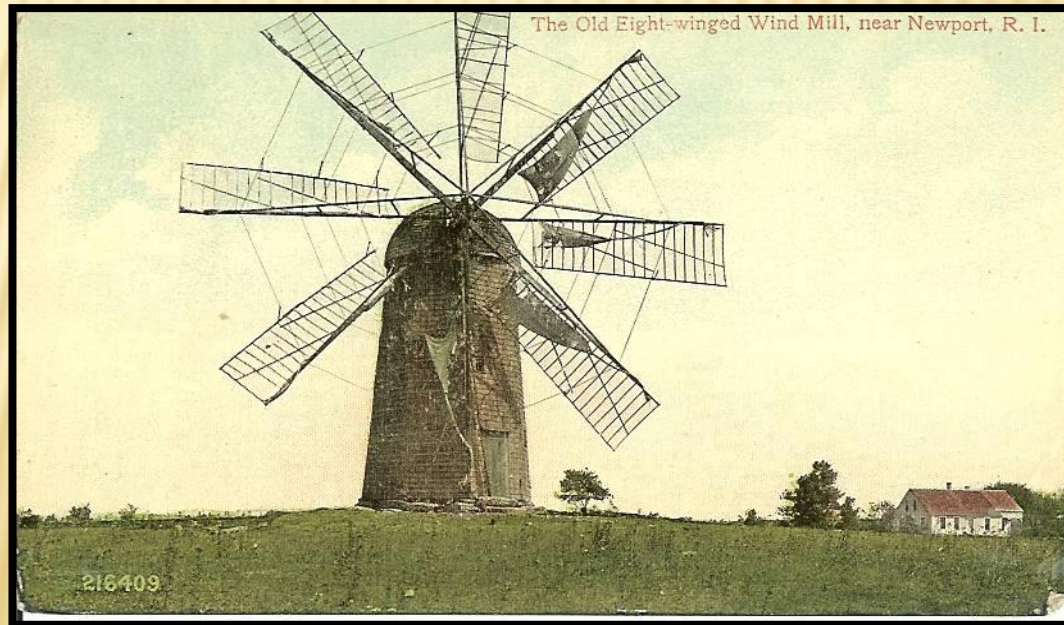
The arrival of the Quakers, inspired by George Fox, in the 1650s brought much greater emphasis on the commercial aspects of agriculture. Fortunes were made

Considerable trade was initiated from Newport to the southwest direction-New Netherlands and others. Wharves were built all along the waterfront to aid this commercial enterprise.



George Fox

Portsmouth meanwhile receded into an agrarian society. Corn-grinding windmills were built, the first by William Corey and William Earle in 1665 on Windmill Hill. Windmills flourished with the last one-Boyd's Mill-grinding corn into the late 1940s.



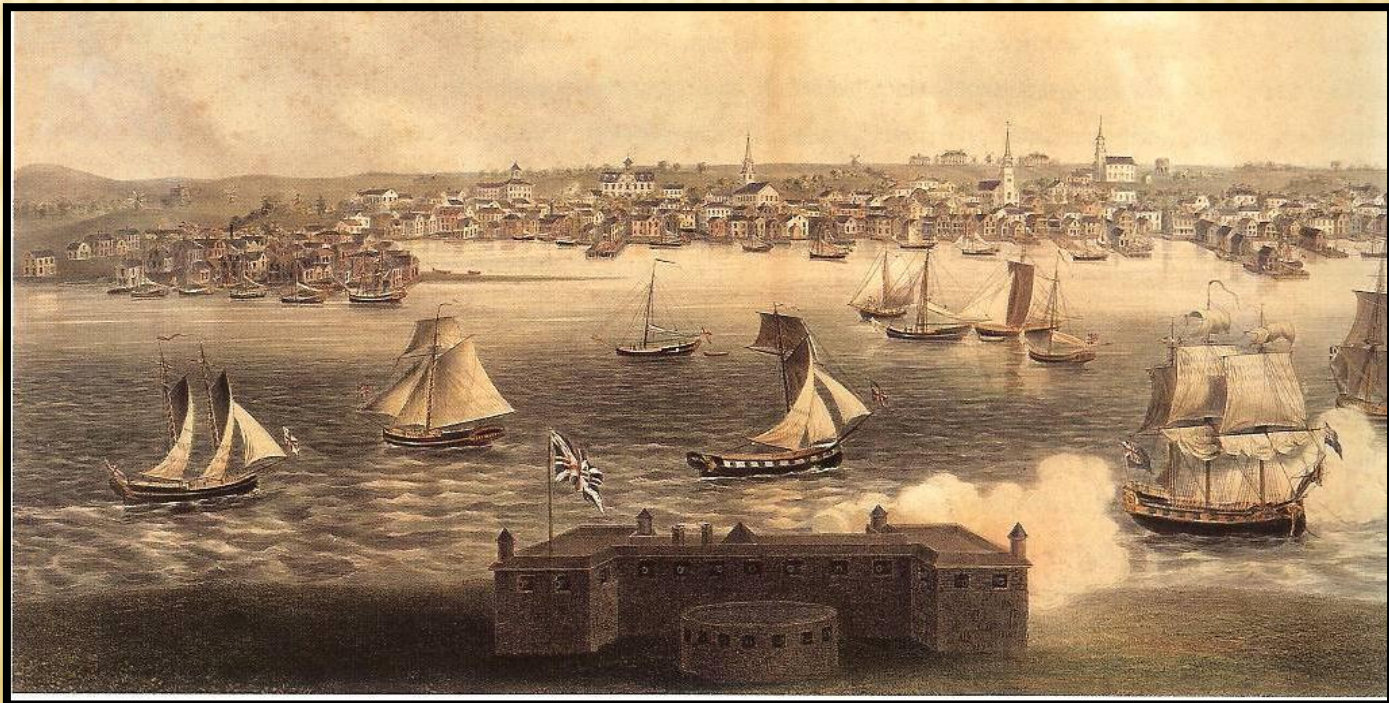
Agriculture here made a rather rapid transition from **subsistence** to **commercial** which included the following:

1. Pigs, cows, horses, sheep and other livestock.
2. Corn and hay were grown to feed livestock. Timber was needed for fences.
3. Other aspects of commerce: ferries, roads, wharves, warehouses, etc
4. Trade with the Caribbean Islands also-triangle trade-slave trade flourished here.



The Triangular Trade

1. From 1708 to 1730 the population of Newport rose from 2203 to 4640
2. In Portsmouth it went from 628 to 813.
3. By the end of the century (1800) Newport had 6739 people and Portsmouth 1684.
(Middletown was incorporated from Newport in 1743).



By 1773 Newport had risen to be one of the five most important commercial ports in British North America.

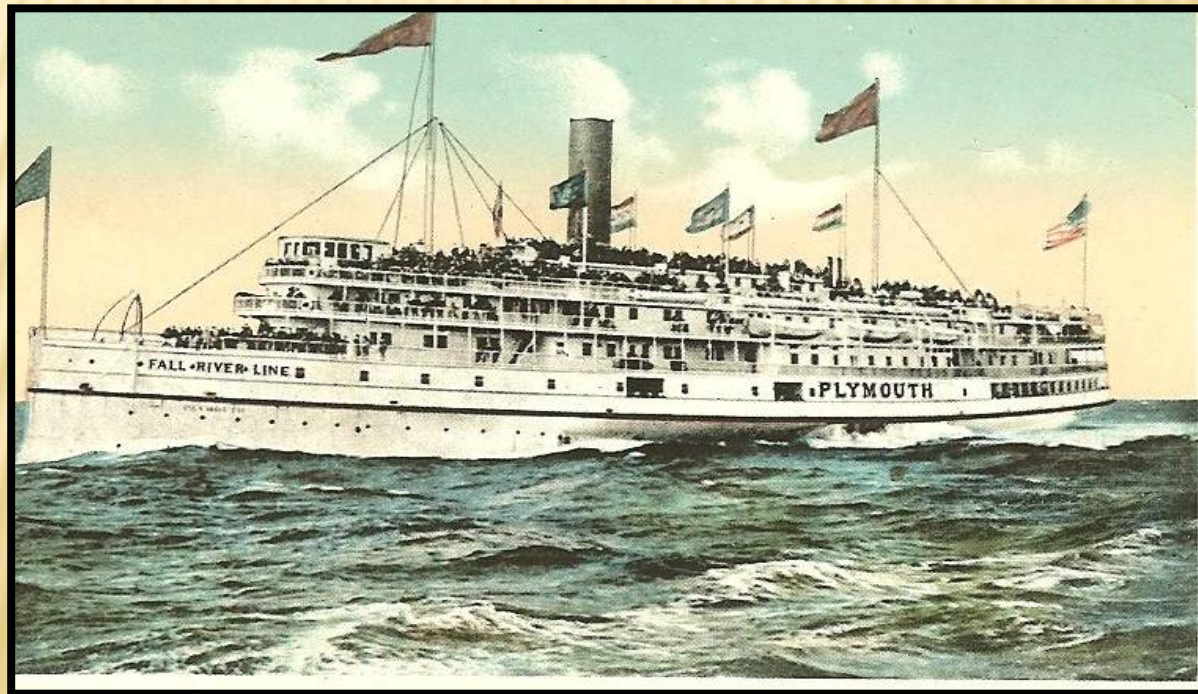
But during the Revolutionary War the island was occupied by British troops from 1776 to 1779. This was a devastating occupation. Newport never recovered its commercial prominence.

Agriculture remained the primary occupation here. During the Civil War the island remained in the backwater, with the only changes being the relocation of the Naval Academy here and the Lovell Military Hospital at Melville.

Other major developments in the middle of the 19th century also had a major impact on agriculture.

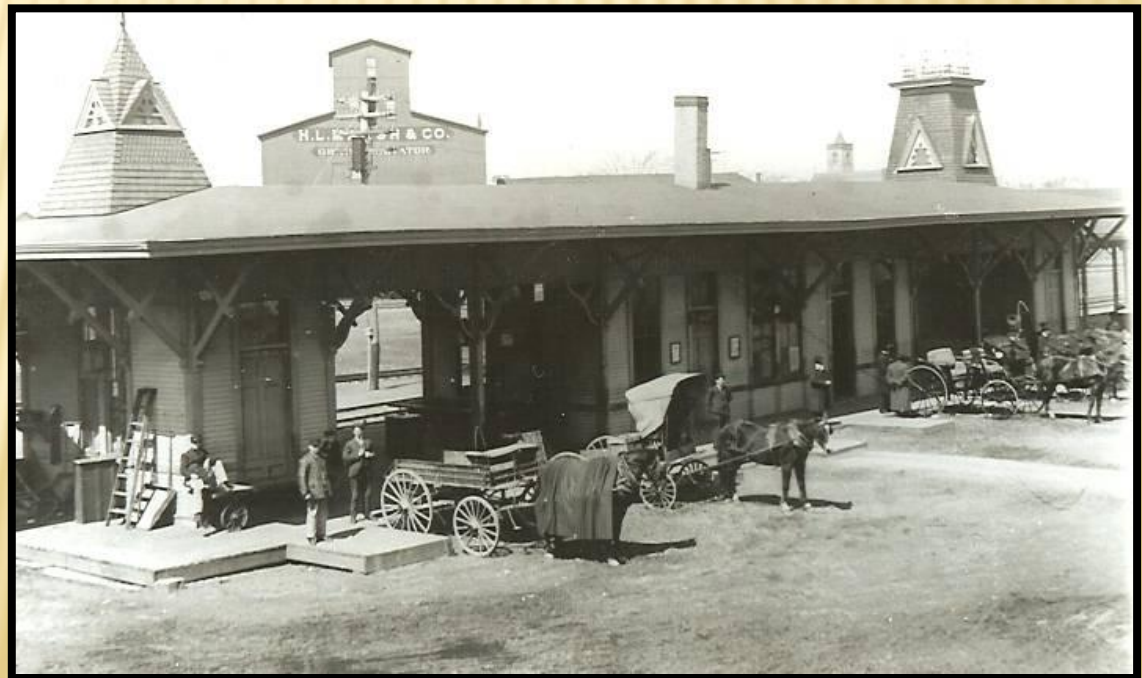
1. Rise of steamship lines-produce and fish-to market

FR Line 1847-freight a priority-till 1937



2. The establishment of the Old Colony and Newport Railway, completed in 1864, for freight and passenger traffic which provided for 9 stops on the island. Much farm produce was shipped to market via the railroad. Passenger service ended in 1938, freight service lasted until 1988.





Much freight and farm produce was hauled on these transportation forms-later even trolleys used for freight.

Census of 1875: **Average value of farm products in Newport County to each inhabitant was \$114.06 (\$2202 today)**. This was double that of any other RI county



A description of the census reflects the following:

“...the population in the county is almost entirely devoted to farming....the land is generally fertile, with less waste or unimproved land than the average of the state, and the cities of Newport and Fall River furnish convenient and favorable markets for the most profitable varieties of farm productions.”

Portuguese migrations: late 19th century-
Portsmouth in the 1870s-many from New Bedford and Fall River-in 1885 in Portsmouth there was one identifiable Portuguese land owner, in 1920 there were 84 and many others rented farms.

1885 census: regarding
number of farms:

1. Newport 97
2. Middletown 192
3. Portsmouth 270

Newport County in 1885,
overall had a population
of over 28,000 of which
4,300 were farmers

Arrival of “Gentlemen’s
Farms” in 1880s



Agriculture by Town 1885

Indicators	Middletown	Newport	Portsmouth
Plowed land	1,622 A	196A	2,693 A
Pasture	2,058 A	495A	4,572 A
Cows	993	264	913
Sheep	489	30	1320
Hens/Chicken	16,514	2,825 bu,	26, 883
Corn	22,577 bu	3,804	35, 618 bu,
Oats	7,907 bu	1,093 bu.	17,946 bu
Milk sold	394,611 gal	88,672 gal	31,470 gal.
Apples	11,377 bu	1,150 bu.	24, 832 bu
Strawberries	14,903 qt	1,100 qt	74,354 qt
Potatoes	25,848 bu.	3,192 bu.	99, 278 bu.
Pumpkins	230,370 lb	14,735 lb.	489, 300 lb.

1885 census (an interesting perspective):

“Though agriculture has been followed by the wisest and the best of men and its praises have been set forth in lofty verse by poets, and in learned discourse by philosophers, it has suffered from the ignorance and sluggishness of many persons who have made it ostensibly their calling, let the intelligence, tact, skill and energy that have characterized the manufacturers of RI be enlisted for the cause of agriculture and the state will become a prolific garden...well-trained gardeners from the Old World are helping on this work.”

By this time manufacturing had come to dominate the RI economy.

- 1. In 1898 the Newport County Agricultural Association was formed- much support from Glen Farm-They established the Newport County Fair which ran from 1898 until 1932. Organization of agriculturalists from all over Newport County.**
- 2. Only two Presidents in its history:
Lincoln Sherman (1898-1930) and
Arthur Sherman (1930-1961)**
- 3. The organization went out of business in 1961 due to a lack of new, young members. The fairgrounds were sold off**

Newport County Fair





Local Farming Scenes: 1920's

During Prohibition (1920-1933) many farms on this island provided grain or storage facilities for the “bootleggers” and a few farmers spent time in jail or paid fines for these activities.

The arrival of the Navy in Newport in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had increased the island’s population significantly and reduced the amount of farmland available. But farming nonetheless persisted as a primary occupation here.

In the 20th century people's horizons were greatly expanded. In World War I the United States sent 2 million men to the Western Front and a popular song of the day asked: "How ya goin' to keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree?"

And that was true of our population which now had significantly greater transportation options to be able to move around.

We were rocked by the stock market crash in 1929 and the ensuing Depression. It bottomed out in 1931 and by then many farms were lost to foreclosures. The Roosevelt Administration even had a program to pay farmers NOT to grow crops.

The came the industrial boom times as we prepared for World War II and the population was further urbanized.

What came next? I'll leave that to Ken Ayers for the second part of this program.

Meanwhile, as a very nostalgic historian I will content myself with looking for more images and enjoying ones like this in particular:

Husking on the Glen Farm, Portsmouth, R. I.



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