

II. Agriculture's Roots on Cape Cod

The native Wampanoag sustained themselves on Cape Cod for millennia planting and harvesting crops such as corn, beans and cranberries in addition to hunting, fishing and shellfishing. When Europeans arrived, the Wampanoag showed them how to make use of the many food plants indigenous to the region. European settlers saw Cape Cod as a place of agrarian opportunity and did not immediately take to marine-based activities (Wheeler and Parker, 1922). As time passed and more settlements were built, farming became highly regarded as a way to make a good living in Barnstable County. Later, the construction of major roads and eventually a railway system enabled farmers to bring goods quickly to roadside stands and to markets both on and off Cape Cod. This infrastructure, in turn, supported additional farming ventures that provided job opportunities as well as the establishment of farming groups that functioned as cooperatives during harvest seasons.

Favorable weather and soil conditions allowed farmers in Barnstable County many opportunities ranging from dairy farming to fruit and vegetable growing, making Cape Cod an agricultural "hot spot" (Wheeler and Parker, 1922). Many different kinds of crops were grown, reflecting the differences in soil composition that created

exclusive growing conditions for highly sought after fruits and vegetables (Table 1). Towns and villages successfully marketed their unique and various farm products to the point of global recognition. Falmouth, for example, was known worldwide for several varieties of strawberries that thrived in the rich medium loam soils. This upper Cape Cod town had optimum soils for high yields of Echo, Howard No. 17, Abington, King Edward, and Big Joe strawberries as well as other fruits. According to the Falmouth Chamber of Commerce (2009), at the turn of the twentieth century, Falmouth was the largest producer of strawberries east of the Mississippi. Large harvests provided employment to local citizens during the growing season. Even Boston businessmen would take a week of vacation to pick strawberries on Falmouth farms for relaxation (Wheeler and Parker, 1922).

Eastham soils, on the other hand, were very sandy and drained quickly, creating an excellent growing environment for root vegetables such as the uncommonly sweet, large white Eastham turnip. Although mystery surrounds the genealogy of this heirloom root vegetable, which has been handed down from generation to generation, its ability to flourish in this outer Cape area is indisputable. Its fame created a demand for the mildly flavored vegetable with the pale purple top nationwide, and placed Eastham on the agricultural map (Whalen, 2009).



Figure 1. Overlooking the farm near Upper and Lower Shawme Ponds in Sandwich, MA. Courtesy of Sturgis Library Archives, MS.

Table 1. Historical agricultural products in the fifteen towns in Barnstable County (“The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Population Resources of Cape Cod in 1921”).

Town	Prominent Historical Agricultural Product
Barnstable	Cranberries
Brewster	Fiber, wood
Chatham	Shellfish
Dennis	Cranberries
Eastham	Asparagus, turnips, carrots, and cranberries
Falmouth	Strawberries, oysters, cranberries, and cattle
Harwich	Cranberries
Mashpee	Cranberries
Orleans	Ducks and cranberries
Provincetown	Fishing
Sandwich	Grain, dairy, and woodlands
Truro	Grain, fiber, and cattle
Wellfleet	Fisheries
Yarmouth	Cranberries and shellfish

Sediment deposits and depressions left from retreat of the Laurentide ice sheet beginning about 20,000 years ago provided the perfect habitat for wild cranberries to grow on Cape Cod. In addition to blueberries and Concord grapes, cranberries are one of only three native fruits that are commercially produced in North America (Lambert, Lass, and Rogers 2004). Cranberries need acidic peat soil, adequate sand, a fresh water supply, and a seven-month growing season with a dormant period in the winter.

Commercial cultivation of cranberries began in Barnstable County in the early 1800s and quickly proceeded to become the principal agricultural income producer (Cape Cod Cranberry Growers’ Association 2008). By the turn of the century, a “dominant cooperative,” where growers sold their harvest to one company to distribute, was started and controlled the price of cranberries. Over the next several decades, the number of acres harvested, the yield per acre, per capita total supply, and price all rose along with an increase in demand (Lambert, Lass, and Rogers 2004).



Figure 2. The harvesting of a cranberry bog at the turn of the century in Harwich Port, MA. Courtesy of Sturgis Library Archives, MS 81. Date taken unknown.

Overall, agriculture on Cape Cod began to diminish following the Civil War. Steam engines and railroads introduced western products that competed with locally produced goods. People were attracted to unfamiliar products that were advertized as having superior quality, making local farm produce seem less attractive (Wheeler and Parker, 1922).

Contributing to the decline of agriculture was soil erosion. Grains were not a prominent crop on Cape Cod, limiting the number of ruminants that could graze and fertilize these lands. Combined with wind-induced erosion, the amount of productive farmland declined further (Wheeler, 1920). As time passed, farming became a less viable line of work causing farmers to find other means of employment.

As readily accessible transportation made it easier for visitors to come to Cape Cod, the peninsula gained in popularity. The Cape’s population soared from about 30,000 in the 1930s to about 215,000 in 2010 and lands that once were devoted to agriculture were transformed into residential developments. Coupled to the expansion of the population was an expansion of the size of residential lots, with the result that much of Cape Cod today comprises residential lots that are too large to mow and too small to farm.

In 1920, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) began to compile farming data for every U.S. county every five years. Unfortunately the USDA used different data sources to compile the information in different years, making it difficult to compare data between years and to interpret the data in a meaningful way (Table 2).

Table 2. Acres of farmland in Barnstable County, 1920–2007 (USDA-NASS website and Amanda Pomicter from the NASS census office).

Year	Acres			
	Cropland	Pasture	Woodland	Accessory land and other
1925	8,872	7,426	15,242	4,345
1930	3,432	1,872	10,238	6,329
1935	8,701	3,100	22,495	7,706
1940	6,284	3,399	14,115	11,619
1945	8,164	2,378	9,254	4,404
1950	7,771	2,618	8,399	2,181
1954	6,938	2,280	7,367	3,832
1959	3,999	594	6,294	1,910
1964	4,062	403*	4,480	1,632
1969	1,788	140*	2,080	1,316
1974	1,897	257	1,397	944
1978	1,537	216	68*	2,536
1982	1,812	*	1,423	1,290
1987	1,884	487	*	1,524
1992	1447	*	*	*
1997	2,930	292*		
2002	3,045	899	774	
2007	2,029	704	1,031	1,822