

Colonial Farmers Used Oxen, Got More Power for Less Feed



While oxen were the early beasts of burden, farmers and their wives performed the field work in grain harvesting.

Most of the labor on Colonial farms was provided by men. Seeding, cultivating, harvesting and many other farm operations were performed with crude tools and the sweat and muscle of the farm family. Oxen and horses were used only to plow and harrow and to haul hay and grain in from the fields.

And on most farms, oxen were much preferred to horses. As Benjamin Franklin observed in 1769, "The farmers are more thriving in those parts of the country where cattle are used than in those where the labour is done by horses. The latter are said to require twice the quantity of food to maintain them, and after all are not good to eat. At least we do not think so."

Unlike horses, oxen could subsist without grain. In the summer they could graze on pasture, and in the winter they could live on hay and corn stalk fodder. When they were no longer strong enough to be used as draft animals, they could be fattened and slaughtered for the table.

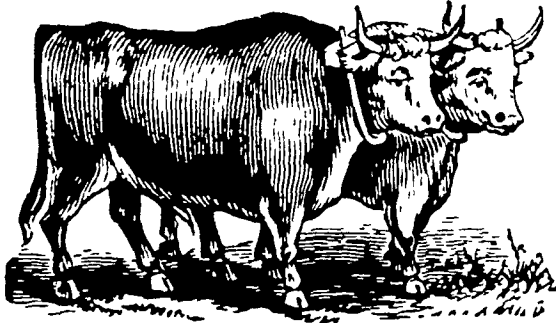
Oxen were tough creatures, much harder than the horses of colonial America, and could haul heavy loads over long distances without tiring. Farmers in Pennsylvania used limestone to improve the productivity of their fields. And while they could pick up the stones from their fields, they needed to transport the stones to kilns where they were heated until they crumbled to a powdery dust. The journey to the kiln and back was often very long. Teams of oxen, although they moved slowly, could be depended upon to make the journey to the kilns and back.

One farmer, who was also a commercial limestone dealer, reported, "I find with my two oxen I can do more work than I could with four horses, and at half the expense. My oxen go to the lime kiln once a week, twenty-one miles in the morning, and return the next day in the forenoon. After resting two hours, they go to work. Horses cannot do this."

One Colonial observer reported that in his area, "Al- most all the work on farms was done with oxen, and in driving his cattle, the old settler would halloo with all his might and swear profusely. This profanity and halloing

implements themselves, traces and lines were ropes made of hemp flax, twisted deer skin and sometimes grape vines. Harnesses were made of crooked limbs or roots. For the ox yoke was much cheaper than harness. Another reason horses weren't found on too many early American farms. Not until tanning became common was leather harness available at a reasonable price.

The slow and plaid ox was better suited for use on hilly or rocky land and on new ground that was full of stumps than the more high-strung horse. Horses were used ex-



Oxen were driven without guidelines, turning on shouted commands from the farmer—'gee' meant right, 'haw' left. They were thought to be necessary or not, the oxen of the day were driven without guidelines, a feat which would have been impossible with horses. At the shouted command of the driver, the oxen would get to the right or haw to the left, or they might also follow the lead of his long whip.

In those days, the methods by which oxen were hitched to farm implements and vehicles were as crude as the

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When roads were improved, especially after turnpikes were built, horses began to gradually replace oxen as draft animals. The development of horse-drawn machinery, beginning about 1830, completed the displacement of oxen, although many yokes of cattle were kept on hill-side farms on up to the time of the Civil War.

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