

Chester Extension Banquet Explores County's Agricultural History

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KENNETT SQUARE (Chester Co.) — At The Stone Barn near Kennett Square, about 133 Chester County Extension Association family and friends learned some things about the agriculture history of their county.

Thursday evening at the extension's annual meeting, farmers and other industry educators and leaders learned that some things have changed in the "five centuries" that have passed in the development of a thriving ag economy in southeastern Pennsylvania.

And they learned that some things really hadn't changed much at all.

In a brief and colorful history of the county as recounted by Colin A. Hanna, chairman of the Chester County Commissioners, the early days of the pioneering county were marked by commerce and controversy.

Right where the banquet took place, the early settlers once called the "back country," said Hanna. Hanna said early colonists were known for few attributes.

"There was lawlessness, they were considered renegades or adventurers," he said.

Hanna referred to a carefully researched and colorfully recorded display of the progress of the county from the 1600s into the next century. The display at the banquet recounted the times from the first settlers of the land owned by William Penn, after the land was obtained from the Lenape tribes in 1682-1683.

Back then, Chester County included a lot of land mass, taking in areas now held by Delaware, Philadelphia, and Berks counties. Delaware County was the first one separated from Chester, in 1729.

Into the mid-1700s, farming was largely subsistence farming. The farmer literally lived off the land and didn't sell livestock or crops. The farms were located near rivers for easy access to transportation and production borrowed heavily from the native Americans — maize, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, gourds, watermelon, and beans.

According to the county commissioner, the people and the land "were pretty rough — and pretty much exhibited pioneer-like qualities," he noted. Eventually, the areas west of Philadelphia, filling with immigrants, included a substantial amount of English, Irish,

and Welsh. They headed west — using the cart paths that eventually became known as routes 1, 3, and 30. The Swiss and German settlers navigated northward using the rivers.

When the families purchased the land from Penn, they first obtained a "warrant," which required that surveying be completed.

Then, a land patent, or "deed," was issued. The word "deed" means to pass on the land patent to subsequent purchasers.

Sometimes it took quite a while to finally obtain ownership of land — as many as 75 years.

"If you think the county government moves slowly, look how far we've come," said Hanna.

In the years 1700-1732, it cost about 10 pounds (the currency at the time) for 100 acres of land. From 1732-1762, the rate increased 50 percent, to 15 pounds per 100-acre tract. The farms then were known as "plantations" and averaged about 150 acres in size.

Power equipment to create arable land was simply nonexistent. Clearing the land took time, a lot of time — about an acre a year. There was only one horse for about every 6-7 families. To rid the area of trees, the trunks were girdled, the bark was cut, the lumber was harvested, and the tree eventually died and was cut down. Stumps remained. Farmers plowed in between stumps, where they could. It took 10-20 years for the stumps to rot and decay enough to be uprooted and tillable land was available.

But some things never change. Hanna noted that in 1764, a survey went out calling for "tax assessment," that included separate categories for cows and horses. Those days, the assessment wasn't on real estate alone, but on livestock. The survey concluded there were 2,502 farms, 6,716 horses, 8,672 cattle, and 9,489 sheep.

And there were the fads. In 1800, a series of agricultural "fads" included one where, for 20 years, Merino sheep were the hit of the land, sweeping the county. In the 1820s, the big attraction was raising all sorts of commercial swine, including existing breeds and the development of cross-breeds. A staple of the human diet was salt pork.

Then, in 1824, the Pennsylvania Agriculture Society of Chester County was formed, and the first



Those achieving 10-year milestones included Pat Taws and Judy Fromm, staff assistants at the extension office. Also, Sarah Wallace, adviser to the EFNEP program, was recognized. In photo, from left, Trudy Dougherty, county extension director; Fred Davis, regional director, who presented the awards; Taws; and Fromm.

ag expo — an ancestor to what is known now as Ag Progress Days in Rockspring — was featured in Paoli. The expo included new ways for farmers to work with seed, uses of corn, millet, how to grow different vegetables, and other items.

In the 1840s, Pennsylvania was tied with New York as the top wheat producing state.

Dairy farming came into being in the 1840s-1860s, with the influx of Herefords, Ayrshires, Galloways, and Holsteins.

Again — some things never change.

In an article which appeared in the newspaper of the time, the American Republican, farmers were reminded of the "good times" when wheat prices stood at \$2 a bushel. An article read: "When the farmer prospers, every other branch of business prospers, also."

Through the 1880s, the development of the railroads after the Civil War provided fresh eggs, milk, cheese, and other products to nearby Philadelphia. At that time, the Patrons of Husbandry group, which later evolved into what we know as the Granges, was established.



Charles Wollaston, Maple Lawn Farm, right, was honored for more than 50 years of service to Extension. In addition, new board members of the association, serving a three-year term, included Jane Pepple, Oxford, owner and operator of Pep-L-Lea Holsteins, left. Not pictured: Eric Miller, Chadds Ford, president of Chadds Ford Winery and Sara L. Munoz, part and community coordinator/home and school visitor for southeast Delco School District.

In 1880, another assessment was completed in Chester County, which showed there were 6,616 farms and 264 grist mills. In 1883, the first Chester County commis-

sioners were appointed. In 1896, the first rural free deliveries began.

The worries about loss of farmland to people moving from the

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In a brief and colorful history of the county as recounted by Colin A. Hanna, chairman of the Chester County Commissioners, center, the early days of the pioneering county were marked by commerce and controversy. At the banquet, special recognition was given to Trudy Dougherty, county extension director, left, for 25 years with cooperative extension. At right is Tony Jasienski, president of the Chester County Cooperative Extension board of directors.



Chester County Century Farmers were honored at the banquet at The Stone Barn near Kennett Square Thursday night.