

2 Food Production in Southwestern Pennsylvania

Historical Perspective

Records from 1840 outline the role agriculture played in the development of the regional economy. The trends established up to eighty years ago are still in place. Farm enterprises have always been very dependent on a good transportation system to get products to markets.

A report on early agriculture in our region, *Agricultural Resources of Pennsylvania, c. 1700-1960 Agriculture in the Settlement Period*, describes the products and travails of life in rural Southwestern Pennsylvania. Nearly everyone was engaged in occupying and clearing land. The resulting products, such as logs, potash, maple sugar, cash grains, and whiskey were sent to market on rudimentary transport routes. Due to the high cost of shipping, farmers concentrated on producing high value items.¹

“By the mid-nineteenth century, farms in Fayette and Westmoreland Counties produced grain, butter, cheese, maple products, and wool, cider, and forest products. Goods were sent to Pittsburgh and from there to New Orleans. The National Road and other roads to Pittsburgh stimulated the agricultural economy by providing good transport to markets and also because travelers and drovers on the road needed food and drink, for themselves and their animals. Large herds of animals were driven out from Westmoreland County on these byways.”²

During the 1800s, sheep farming was a mainstay in Greene and Washington Counties. “By 1860, Washington County was the nation’s leading sheep county.”³



Between 1890 and 1930, the number of farms was declining. With the introduction of new technologies, including electricity, agriculture was changing. Mechanization came slowly to regional farms. In many cases, topography limited the efficacy and use of new farm technologies. Jobs were opening in nearby mines and other industries.

After 1895, “farm families in the Southwest made their living by combining market farming, subsistence farming, off-farm employment and occasional lease or royalty payments.”⁴

¹ *Agricultural Resources of Pennsylvania, c. 1700-1960 Agriculture in the Settlement Period*, Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission, The Pennsylvania Agricultural History Project, <http://phmc.info/aghhistory>

² *Allegheny Mountain Part-time and General Farming, 1840-1960*. p10

³ *Southwestern Pennsylvania Diversified Agriculture and Sheep Raising, Agricultural Resources of Pennsylvania, c. 1840-1960*. p33

⁴ *Agriculture in the Settlement Period, 1700-1840 HISTORIC AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES OF PENNSYLVANIA, 1700-1960: A NATIONAL REGISTER MULTIPLE PROPERTY DOCUMENTATION* Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission 2014. p99

Industry shaped farming throughout the region and farming's fortunes tended to rise and fall with those of industry. A variety of industrial and extractive pursuits developed in the region during this period.

Manufacture districts provided ready markets for agricultural products. Hay and oats could be fed on the farm or to draft animals used in the mines. Brewers and distillers in the city needed grain. Human consumers bought dairy products, meat, poultry, eggs, fruit, and potatoes. Animals were brought to city butcher houses and sausage factories for localized processing.

Overall in the region between 1920 and 1960, farming either continued the previous pattern of combining farm work with industrial wage labor, or became more specialized, larger scale, and more commercialized.

The important trends in the agriculture sector in Southwestern Pennsylvania that began in the 1920s continue today:

- Smaller Farms
- Declining Number of Farms
- Balanced by Larger, Specialized, Commercial Farms
- Off-farm Employment
- Pittsburgh Market continues to offer Services and Markets for Regional Food Producers



Preserving Farmland

According to the Pennsylvania Bureau of Farmland Preservation, Pennsylvania leads the nation in the number of farms and acres permanently preserved for agricultural production. The state offers the following programs to safeguard farmed land.

Easement Purchase Program

The Pennsylvania Agricultural Conservation Easement Purchase Program was developed to protect prime farmland by purchasing conservation easements from farmers (Figure 2-1).

Agricultural Security Areas

Agricultural Security Areas protect farms and farmland from non-agricultural uses. A combined minimum of 250 acres is required for the establishment of an ASA, which may include non-adjacent farmland parcels of at least 10 acres or be able to produce \$2,000 annually from the sale of agricultural products (Figure 2-2).

Participants receive special consideration regarding:

- Protection from local ordinances and nuisance lawsuits affecting normal farming activities.
- Review of farmland condemnation by state and local government agencies.

An ASA qualifies land for consideration under the farmland preservation program at the owner's request, if the ASA has at least 500 acres enrolled.

The Clean and Green Act

The Clean and Green Act, established in 1974, is designed to preserve farmland, forest land and open space by taxing land according to its use as farmland rather than its market value and its potential use for activities other than agriculture. Additional information is available from the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Farmland Preservation, www.agriculture.state.pa.us.



A regional initiative expanding the local food value chain can support the sustainability of farmland by increasing its economic value, thereby decreasing its value for residential housing and other development.