



Connecticut's Rich Tobacco History

The section of the Connecticut River Valley spanning from Portland, Connecticut to the southern tip of Vermont is home to the best farming soil in New England. This region is colloquially referred to as Tobacco Valley. If you've driven anywhere in North-Central Connecticut above Hartford, you've probably noticed the long, usually red, tobacco barns. I recently visited the Connecticut Valley Tobacco Museum in Windsor, partly built inside one of these historic barns. The museum is dedicated to the history of the tobacco farming industry and is the source for the information in this article, unless otherwise stated.

The history of Connecticut tobacco starts long before European settlers came to America. Archaeological evidence suggests that tobacco in the Northeast dates back to 2,500 years ago. The Algonquin peoples maintained tobacco as one of their crops for medicinal and traditional purposes. In 1633, settlers founded Windsor as the first town in Connecticut. In less than a decade, tobacco was being farmed for trade, personal use in pipes, and even used to make tea. Allegedly, it was Israel Putnam, of Revolutionary War fame, who brought a different type of tobacco seeds back to Connecticut after a military expedition to Cuba in 1762 that led to the development of Connecticut's famous cigar wrappers. By the early 1800s, cigars surpassed pipe



*Three "Leaf Boys" 9, 9, and 11 years old, Cybalski Tobacco Farm.
Location: Hazardville, CT (1917). Source: Library of Congress.*

smoking in popularity. Connecticut devoted more acreage to commercial tobacco, with family farms planting the Connecticut Broadleaf variety. During the Civil War, the CT valley region crop yielded up to ten million pounds annually. Throughout the United States, CT tobacco became synonymous with quality. To compete with foreign competition in the tobacco market, the Havana seed was introduced to Connecticut soil. Both of these "sun grown" tobacco leaves were primarily used for the wrapper of the cigar, the outermost leaf, or for the binder, the leaf underneath the wrapper that holds the filler tobacco together.

In 1900, with the help of the USDA and Connecticut farmers, the tobacco industry was revolutionized when the first shade tent went up in Windsor. These light cotton cheesecloth tents

were spread over a new hybrid tobacco leaf, creating Connecticut Shade tobacco. The cloth prevented direct sun from hitting the plant while simultaneously raising humidity levels. This produces leaves that are thin and smooth with minimal veins. After curing, the leaves turn a light golden brown. This Connecticut Shade tobacco is still widely regarded as some of the finest cigar tobacco in the world (Cigar Aficionado). Tobacco use soared into the 1920s with cigars at the forefront. In 1925, Connecticut was dedicating more than 30,000 acres to produce Shade tobacco as it rose to become the state's top export.

This booming industry began to decline in the 1950s. Cigarettes overtook cigars and a new paper/tobacco blended wrapper emerged as a challenger of Shade tobacco. Continuing past the 1950s and into the last few decades, other countries such as Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Cuba began to produce Shade tobacco. It became increasingly hard for Connecticut to compete as Shade tobacco grown here was far more expensive for cigar brands to purchase due to cheaper labor, better yields, and in some cases better cloud cover in these competing countries. A Shade wrapper grown in these countries using seeds from CT are still referred to as *Connecticut*. For instance, the blend information on a cigar with a Shade wrapper produced in Ecuador would be called *Ecuadorian Connecticut*.

The once massive tobacco industry in Connecticut has slowly faded. From a height of more than 30,000 acres to less than 2,000 in 2019 (Hartford Courant). The red tobacco barns now serve as a vestige of Connecticut's longest standing industry. The tracts of land that used to be tobacco fields have often been developed for housing, or more recently, used for solar farms or growing grains for craft beer. This is not to say that the tobacco industry in Connecticut is dead. There are still a handful of growers and families that have kept this tradition alive and continue to sell Connecticut Shade to premium cigar brands. In fact, the hobby of cigar smoking



seems to be making a comeback in the last couple of years. Cigars are selling at a rate not seen in more than two decades (Cigar Association of America). Connecticut Broadleaf and Shade can still be seen growing in towns such as Enfield, Windsor, Suffield, Somers, and more. A photo accompanying this article is

of five new tobacco barns going up in Somers in March 2023, showing the industry is here to stay, at least in some capacity.

In my next article, I'll continue the story of tobacco in Connecticut. Focusing on the farming and harvesting process along with a spotlight on those that have worked the fields over this industry's long history.

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The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.