



## Connecticut's Rich Tobacco History (Continued)

In my last article featured in the April edition of the Neighbors Paper, I gave a brief timeline of tobacco in Connecticut. Arguably, the State's longest standing industry and our largest export at one point. This article will focus on the farming and harvesting process, along with the hands that worked the fields. Again, much of the information found here was sourced from my visit to the Connecticut Valley Tobacco Museum in Windsor, unless otherwise stated.

Working tobacco has never been an easy job. Shade and Sun Grown tobacco varieties are prepared as seedlings and then planted in May or June. Weeding is done every third day at the seedling stage, for many years this job was mainly done by children. Depending on the variety of tobacco, different upkeep processes are used throughout the summer. We will focus on Connecticut Shade tobacco, which is a bit more labor intensive. Cheesecloth tents are put up over the field and the small plants are transplanted for a summer's worth of tending. The buds of flowers are removed as quickly as they are found, in order to prioritize larger leaf growth. The purpose of the tents are two-fold: To shade the tobacco from the sun and to keep humidity levels high. Workers tend to the plants underneath these cotton cheesecloth tents through the hottest weather of the summer. Smaller leaves called "suckers" are removed constantly throughout the

growing season, again to prioritize growth for larger leaves. Workers move through the fields routinely as each level of leaves on the 9-foot-tall tobacco plant matures. At the end of the day, workers are covered with tobacco juice, dirt, and sweat.



*Underneath a shade tobacco tent (1940). Library of Congress.*



*Young girls of 11, 12, 13 yrs. String in sheds of Goodrich Tobacco Farm near Gildersleeve, CT (1917). Library of Congress.*

After harvesting, the leaves are sewn onto long, thin strips of wood and hung from the rafters of the tobacco barns to cure. In both the past and in many cases the present, this job is primarily done by women. The leaves are dried by monitoring the weather and by using the wall slats in the drying shed designed to control ventilation. An artificial heating method can also be used to help in this process, such as charcoal burners or the more modern use of propane. After the tobacco has cured for several months, they are shipped out to cigar companies for further curing and fermentation, along with rolling, packaging, and preparation for market sale.

Originally, the work of farming and harvesting tobacco crops for commercial use was done by the family who owned the farm. Perhaps occasionally they would hire an additional hand or two. As cigars became the most popular tobacco product during the early 1800s, production increased and more hands were needed to assist. These hands would generally be



*Polish hired helpers stripping tobacco in Windsorville, CT (1940). Library of Congress.*

White men, women, and children that were local to the farm. With the advent of Shade Tobacco and a quickly growing industry in the early 1900s, the need for seasonal labor grew exponentially. Hundreds of farms were growing the crop at this time period and workers were hired from Hartford and the surrounding area of Central Connecticut (ConnecticutHistory.org). Something of note is the quantity of women and children you will see in photographs on these farms. Women and children could vastly outnumber men on tobacco fields in the early 1900s. Child labor would remain prevalent in this industry until Connecticut set the age requirement for agricultural labor at 14 in 1947 (ConnecticutHistory.org). European immigrants settling in Connecticut cities were also commonly seen on tobacco fields. One shift in the workforce occurred during the First World War. New factories started production on war materiel, offering higher wages at a steady

pace to the seasonal tobacco farmhands. Many immigrants returned home to Europe, especially Polish, Lithuanians, and Czechs, to either fight or be with their family (ConnecticutHistory.org). As Connecticut tobacco farmers struggled to find enough local and reliable workers to employ, they had to expand their search by importing labor. This search would not extend overseas just yet, but actually to the American South - targeting Black college students. The search began in 1916 with the help of the National League on Urban Conditions, which advertised seasonal work



*Truck load of tobacco workers bound for American Sumatra Tobacco Farm, South Windsor (1917). Location: Hartford, CT. Library of Congress.*

in the North to Black Southern students to help pay for their schooling. By the end of the year, 3,000 students were in Hartford (Scott, *Negro Migration During The War*, 1919). In 1944, one of these seasonal workers would be fifteen-year-old Martin Luther King Jr. Indeed, his treatment in Connecticut may have played some role in his future as a Civil Rights activist. In a letter to his mother, he wrote, "I never thought that a person of my race could eat anywhere but we...ate in one of the finest restaurants

in Hartford and we went to the largest shows there." He remarked similarly in a letter to his father, "The white people

here are very nice. We go to any place we want to and sit anywhere we want to" (Modern Farmer, January 2022). Though the work was extremely difficult, for some there was the appeal of escaping conditions in the South if a seasonal factory job could not be obtained.

After the Second World War, there was a further decrease in the number of Connecticut residents that wanted to work the tobacco fields for meager pay. In addition to the seasonal hiring of students, from the South and locally, tobacco growers would have to search for overseas labor. Jamaica was one source. Another was the significant migration from Puerto Rico in the 1950s through the 1970s. Soon, these groups became a significant portion of the workforce for this strenuous job. Many seasonal workers decided to settle in Connecticut permanently, contributing to other New England states and its numerous Puerto Rican communities (Glasser, *Connecticut Explored*, 2002; Landaverde, *NBC Connecticut*, 2022).

As I mentioned in my previous article, the tobacco industry has shrunk substantially in the last few decades. Many readers local to the River Valley region may remember working seasonally on the tobacco fields during the summer off from school or at least having the opportunity to do so. This opportunity was advertised to me as a high school student in the early 2010s and is still offered today, although there may not be many takers. Currently, seasonal labor often comes from Jamaica (Hartford Courant, August 21, 2022). Even though one of Connecticut's most famous and longest industries is fading, it is here to stay in some capacity. The photo below is of five new tobacco barns in Somers, CT ready for their first harvest.



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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.*