

Life on the South Branch

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A Time Of Prosperity

Cattle were not the only source of wealth. Colonel Garret VanMeter owned 90 head of sheep, 70 head of largest hogs, 60 lesser hogs, 17 mares, 19 colts, and 13 horses in addition to 163 cattle when his estate was appraised in 1789. Both sheep and hogs occur regularly in the 41 inventories of Hardy County residents filed from 1780 to 1790. The appraisers reported from 3 to 9 sheep and 9 - 15 hogs. Tax returns list the number of horses owned by an individual. The larger farmers frequently owned as many as 15 or 16 horses, but it was unusual for anyone to have as many as 20 horses in the 1780's and 1790's. The largest numbers on a farm were often found above the Gap and in the Mill Creek section, rather than in the cattle country of the South Branch Valley. Martin Shobe Sr., Christopher Armentrout, and David Welton had the most horses in Hardy County, next to Garret VanMeter, and were usually taxed for 20-30 horses. Adam, Jacob, John Fisher, George Harness, James Machir, and Abel Seymour also paid taxes on 20-35 horses in the 1790's. William Cunningham's 60 horses on the 1801 tax assessment was as exceptional as Garrett VanMeter's 57 horses in 1786.

Most Hardy County farmers grew various small grains. Rye, wheat, and corn grew on most Hardy County farms in the 1780's. Cornelius Westfall's appraisers reported 7 acres of wheat and (acres) of rye are mentioned in more than half the estate inventories. Hay stacks, corn and "corn fother" are mentioned in fewer than a third of the inventories. Oats are a much less common crop. Adam Couchman's appraisal in 1786 is the first mentioned and there are only four others. Peter Casey raised wheat, rye, oats, flax, hay and 35 acres of corn.

Nearly every appraisal in the 1780's included hemp, "broke hemp," "unbroken hemp," or the hemp brake itself, the tool used in breaking hemp stalks to extract the fibers. Flax and flaxseed occur less frequently, but more than half the inventories include flax in some form or a flax hackle. Both crops were probably grown in no more than an acre or two, primarily for household cloth-making. There had been a bounty on hemp growing and it was a commercial crop of some importance through the American Revolution, but was rapidly fading in the 1780's.

Wagons were owned by nearly every Hardy County farmer in this decade. The few appraisals without wagons are mainly of people with other occupations. Farming tools have become more specialized as well as more numerous.

Craftsmen followed their own trades, but often owned tools for several related ones. Captain Jacob Reed's 1780 inventory included gunstocking, turning, carpenter's, cooper's, and joiner's tools. Adam Fisher, a blacksmith, had smith's, joiner's and gunstocking tools. Farmers like Jacob Yoakum and James Sears owned shoemaker's and carpenter's tools; some people still had to be jacks-of-all-trades, but the Hardy County economy permitted some specialization by tradesmen and artisans.

Leonard Hire's inventory included stills, still tubs, and copper ware. John Westfall also had a still and still tubs. Michael Harness had 110 gallons of brandy, 9 hogsheads and 2 barrels of cider and one barrel of cider-royal.

Looms, tackles, gears, weaver's spools turned up in nearly half the inventories. The owners, such men as Leonard Hire and Jacob Miller and Andrew Viney, cannot have been primarily weavers, since their estates reflect farming and other occupations.

John Westfall's appraisers valued "servant man John Ozborn" at L 8, just a tenth of the value they assigned to "Negro Man Tom." This is the only reference to an indentured servant in the 1780's. Slaves are mentioned in one of every five appraisals.

One index of the prosperity of Hardy County residents can be found in their investments. Michael Harness had two militia certificates, worth L 32, David Hogue had a military warrant for 200 acres that he purchased from one Robert Galbreath. Few could approach the scale of Colonel Garrett VanMeter whose estate included Land Office Certificates valued at L 459 and Military Certificates valued at L 619.

Only 6 of the inventories in this 1780-1790 sample listed money loaned to others. Some represented bonded debts of only a pound or two. Cash in varying amounts was part of 8 estates.

Life on the South Branch and Lost River had become more comfortable by 1780. Household furnishings and personal possessions reflect a much higher standard of living than in 1750-1760. Widow Ann Reed had a "cubbert" with pewter, a "broken set tea wair," knives, forks, and a tea canister. Jacob Yoakum's appraisers noted a table, 6 chairs, earthen ware and a looking glass. Lawrence Haff had two chests, a cupboard, two tables, 6 chairs and a coffee mill. Matthew George Stookey had a pewter coffee pot, but still used 8 trenchers. Wooden ware was very uncommon, by the 1780's. Pewter dishes are most common. Nearly everyone owned at least one pewter basin or several plates. Leonard Hire had pewter tankards. John Westfall's kitchen cupboard held a sugar box, coffee pot, tea kettle, porringer and "delf plates." Alexander Dugan (Doogan) left 3 earthen plates and 5 tea cups. Adam Hider had 8 tea cups and George Sites 4 tea cups.

Rooms were no longer so bare. Widow Jane Denton had a big chair, an armchair and two small chairs. Jacob Miller's house furnishings included a chest of drawers, chest, armchair, 4 chairs, 2 clocks, a brass clock, a tobacco box. Both lived on Lost River. Peter Casey in the Old Fields section had a desk and bookcase, 2 tables, a stand, another table, 3 chests, 7 chairs, a clock and 3 looking glasses. His neighbor Colonel Garret VanMeter had a cannon stove, the only stove listed in an inventory, a desk and bookcase, many small tables and chests and a dozen chairs. He

set his table with crockery and owned silver tea and table spoons, sugar tongs and sugar box as well as 9 pewter plates and 2 "basons." Colonel VanMeter's inventory is interesting from its clear separation of one room from another, suggesting greater privacy in a large house. Nearly all appraisers listed from three to six beds, bedsteads and bedding, feather beds and chaff beds, blankets and quilts.

Poorer people left few possessions, clothes, a bed, a few tools, a cow, a horse, sometimes even less than that. A fourth of the inventories in the sample are under L 50. Jacob Rodes (Rhodes) left only his clothing, silver buckles, handkerchief, razor, snuffbox, and two books, the whole valued at L 14. His appraisers also found unpaid bills "due for schooling to said Rhodes." He was evidently a Hardy County school teacher.

Many inventories in the 1780's listed books, few by title. Captain Jacob Reed's appraisers listed "Hole Duty of Man," "Bibel," psalm book and "Young Man's Best Companion." These four are commonly found, along with a prayer book. Jacob Miller's estate included "dutch printed books." Colonel Garrett VanMeter owned a large Bible, "Boston's Whole Works," Dictionary, "Looking Unto Jesus Christ", "Complete Duty of Man," "Confession of Faith," "Durham on Isaiah", "Pilgrim's Progress", "Muir's Sermons," "McEwen's Essays", "Watts Hymnal and Psalms," and "9 other books."