Farming Williamsburg: A Collaborative Oral History Project of Williamsburg's Agrarian Past

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Finding Our Roots

Introducing the Project

A farming chart is an important tool. While hidden from view, man, woman, and child work and play as they tend the earth. Rural communities like Williamsburg, Massachusetts, trace their roots to agrarian traditions; however, in many of these areas, those practices are fading from view and residing in a forgotten past. What are the implications for rural community present and future if these practices aren’t maintained?

This oral history project, spearheaded by Ferrell Group collaborative student gardener program at the Rhode Island School of Design, is an iterative oral history project that involves a collaboration between [names redacted] and [names redacted] and [names redacted]. Through this initiative, students are encouraged to think productively and to construct a meaningful narrative of the past. The project is part of Ferrell Group’s larger initiative to support collaborative, interregional projects that hold a promise of community and importance for local residents.

“Food on the Farm Table”

Families are what they grew, following a fragility of food and water available in provision. The rural community provided supplemental food with self-sufficient cultivation of both food and drink. Domestic animals were raised for the purpose of providing meat and milk, and milk cows were used as an asset to provide income. Numerous individuals stored from self-sufficiency of animals and the economy of raising of rabbits and poultry.

“We work is what you play; what you want to do.” – Sontha Thompson

Gender Roles

Women had a rigid division of labor between the genders; they provided the household labor. Women were responsible for household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and child care. While Black recalled that many women were at the forefront of the movement to demand change, many women were not always as active in the movement. Women were often cast aside or forgotten about in the movement. Women's roles were often seen as more familial and women were often seen as mothers, nurses, and teachers.

Young women were often seen as more familial and women were often seen as mothers, nurses, and teachers. The division of labor and social roles were different for women. Women had different roles based on their economic status.

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Preserving for the Future

The material of farming families in Williamsburg, Connecticut, and other rural towns has been read in history as commercial farming has grown and younger generations have adopted other occupations. The farming community is facing challenges that are exacerbated by changes in the local economy and environment. As a result, the farming community is struggling to preserve the history of their families.

“The average age of farmers—it’s close to the age where everyone else thinks about retirement.” – Terry Everett

Important Lessons

When farmers are asked what important lessons current and future generations could learn from the history of farming, gardening, and local food preparation in Williamsburg and Connecticut, many farmers mentioned the importance of community and support. They emphasized the importance of working together to preserve the history of the farming community. They also emphasized the importance of creating opportunities for young people to learn about and be involved in the farming community.

In other words, farming family activity builds and organizes communities that worked and played together and depended upon each other for survival. Additionally, community activities provide opportunities for young people to engage with their local environment, learn about the history of their families, and develop a sense of identity.

The important lesson is this: don’t throw away your heirloom varieties, but instead, encourage diversity and support the farmers who are trying to preserve the history of the farming community. This is an important lesson for all of us, regardless of our background or location.