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Newsletter

Back to the Past: A column highlighting the natural history of the Watershed

Orchards of the Cooks Creek Country

By: *David Oleksa*

In previous issues of the Cooks Current, the farming side and industrial side as well as the nature side of our beautiful Cooks Creek Valley have been discussed. In this article we will attempt to address another issue that really hasn't received the attention it deserves. Growing fruit has had an important place in this region's history. Through the 19th and first half of the 20th century, fruit growing allowed the local farmers to supply their families with a delicious and nutritious supplement to their diets and at the same time allowed a new stream of income to be garnered from the nearby city folk. The two major fruit crops that were grown here were apples and peaches.



Apples originated in eastern Turkey and they were brought to America by the colonists. The only native apple to North America is the crab apple and although it had an important place through cross-pollinating with the European imports and developing new varieties, it had little commercial value itself. The first apple orchard was established in Boston by the Reverend William Blaxton in 1625.

From there, the apples seemed to follow old well-established Native American trails and spread through the countryside. Soon every farm had some type of apple orchard to boast about. The apples that were grown and used during the 17th and 18th century were far different from the apples with which we are familiar. Firstly, they were not used for eating but rather for the making of cider. The fruit tended to be sour rather than sweet and it wasn't until the 19th century that sweeter varieties became prized. Henry David Thoreau claimed that he disliked sweetness in an apple and much preferred one that "was sour enough to set a squirrel's teeth on edge and make a jay scream." Cider was important to the colonists as the water was often not fit to drink and cider was the preferred beverage at meal time with adults drinking it "straight" while the children had theirs watered down.

As time went on, tastes changed and a desire for sweeter apples developed for eating rather than for the making of cider. Apple orchards in this area produced varieties of the fruit which was either stored in frost free root cellars for the families' own use or were sold at local markets in Easton or Bethlehem. Through discussions with some of the more senior members of the community, we learned that there were extensive apple orchards in the Durham area along Old Furnace Road and extending up the mountainside along Route 212. Indeed, there are still some of the ancient apple trees that still exist but neglect and age prevent them from having any usable fruit.

Peaches are native to China and had widespread cultivation in Persia. The tree is surprisingly related to the cherry, plum, and almond and was brought to South America by the Spaniards in the 16th century. It didn't reach England and France until the 17th century and not until the 18th century did it find its way to North America. George Minifie is credited with establishing the first

peach orchard in the colonies when he brought some peach trees to his estate, The Bucklands, in Virginia. Peaches are far more sensitive to cold winters and late spring frosts than are apples and they never became the commercial success that people hoped for. As a matter of fact, they were not commercially produced until the 19th century and then primarily in Maryland, Delaware, Georgia and Virginia. Another problem that the fruit had was that it was difficult to transport, its season was unfortunately short, and it had poor storage ability.

However, the enterprising farmers of our area came to the conclusion that they were on the north edge of the peach's geographical limits (temperature no lower than -20 degrees F. in winter, and 80 to 85 degrees during ripening season) and that the soil (which has to be well drained) was well suited for peaches. They figured that placing the trees on a southern or western slope would enable them to grow the fruit profitably. The nearby markets would provide an opportunity to sell the sensitive fruit since it wouldn't have to be transported any great distance or over any great time period.



A soil Conservation Map (actually an aerial photograph) from 1938 shows some of these peach orchards just north of Durham along Durham Road and County Line Road. Mr. Bob Crouse, a local retired farmer informed us that the peaches that were grown in these orchards were of high quality and were especially prized by the residents of Bethlehem and Easton as well as by the families that grew them.

Today, sadly, these orchards both apple and peach are gone. The only exception is Bechtold's Orchard on Route 412 just north of Springtown. Driving along the road when the trees are in blossom or when the workers are busy picking the ripe fruit for sale, it's tempting to think about what the rest of the area was like when orchards were a much more common sight in our valley.