Farming in Stratford, Part One

Respectfully submitted by Carole Dadino, Stratford Historian

Over the past 300+ million years, there were cycles where our homes once sat on the bottom of a deep sea. During these cycles, when land rose, the fierce weather eroded the rocks, creating sand, only to be covered with a deep sea again. During each cycle, sediments from dead marine plants and sea creatures, mixed with the clays, sands and gravel from eroded rocks, settled on the bedrock. These layers are up to, 100 feet thick (Much less as it tapers to Cape May). As land life progressed over eons, and the seas retreated, dead land animals, including Dinosaurs, and plant life, added nourishments to the layers. The result is the sand (soil) that gives us our famous Jersey Tomatoes and Corn. Stratford actually has two soil types, sands and greens and marl. The Tomlinson Mansion, on Laurel Road, sits on the greens and marl and continues to "settle". (Long Story)

South Jersey's Earliest Farmers

The first Native American Inhabitants, arrived in New Jersey about 11,000 years ago. They were Nomadic Hunters, as their major food supply consisted of large game animals, such as Mastodons. Within a few thousand years, their main supply of meat sources died out due to over hunting or possibly, climate change. (Ice Age?) With only small game left, hunting declined in favor of agriculture.



Nuts, berries and roots were gathered, followed by farmsteads of corn, beans, and tobacco.

Artifacts found along Signey Run and Big Timber Creek, both bordering Stratford, indicate the land was once farmed by Lenni-Lenape Indian clans. (Lenni-Lenape means "original people".) Unaware of fertilization and crop rotation, the clans would continually relocate, when their crops failed.

First Settlers

According to recorded history of South Jersey, land previously farmed by the Native Americans, was sold to early settlers for a few trinkets. The name "Big Timber Creek" is found on deeds between Quakers and Indian clans. Between 1714 and 1716, Major Abraham Porter, a provincial military agent (King's Agent) obtained 3,000 acres of local farmlands. Porter owned a Sawmill and a Farming business. An advertisement announcing the sale of a portion of his land listed, "A Saw-Mill and a great Quantity of Timber and Meadow Land, abounding on both sides of Gloucester River, commonly call'd Timber-Creek." This included a portion of his land where Laurel Mills Farms now sits. Although this sale also included portions of Lindenwold and Laurel Springs, it is not clear what portions of Stratford were included.

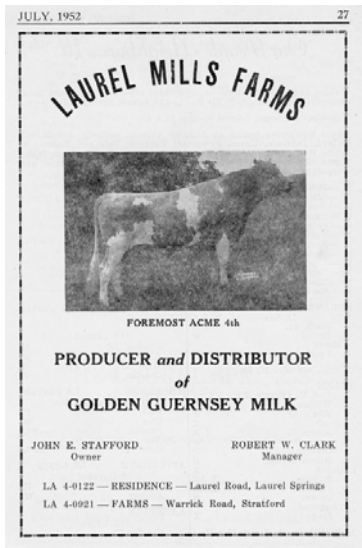
Stratford's Farm Families

In 1745, John Hillman purchased about 500 acres of the late Major Porter's farmland, from Thomas Atkinsonan. It is believed that, about 1730, Atkinsonan and a Thomas Webster had purchased the land at auction. The sale included Major Porter's 1719 Sawmill. Hillman repaired the Sawmill and later added a Gristmill. The Mills and property were passed on to his family, in 1754. On October 13, 1821, Benjamin Tomlinson was deeded the land from Josiah Hillman and rebuilt the Gristmill. Benjamin's son, Albert, continued in his father's footsteps, running the Gristmill, farming the land and raising cattle until his death in 1924



The Tomlinson Mill turned out up to 20,000 pounds of milled corn, wheat and other grains, each week.

1924, records show the Mill and land was turned over to John Stafford, Tomlinson's Miller.



Stafford continued to run the Gristmill until 1956. (It was destroyed by a fire in 1958.) Stafford also continued to farm the land and raised cattle for his Dairy business. The farmland, not including the Tomlinson Mansion property, was then sold to the developers of Laurel Mills Farms and Stratford Estates.



The Stafford Farm and buildings, from Warwick Road.