



Teacher Guide

Please find below background information on the Ogden Family and the town of Fairfield during colonial times.

The Ogden House

During the spring of 1750, newlyweds David and Jane Sturges Ogden moved into their new home on the road to Greenfield. They had reason to look forward to their future. Both came from established families who could afford to start them out well in life. Jane brought a reasonable dowry and David's family provided the house and land. For the next 125 years it was home for the Ogden family in the farming and coastal shipping town of Fairfield. Today, the Ogden House is an exceptional survivor of a typical mid-18th century farmhouse.

David and Jane Ogden descended from 17th century Puritan settlers of Fairfield. Both of their families lived not more than 2 miles apart; it was a typical 18th century Fairfield marriage between neighbors. Jane's parents lived in Mill Plain and David's brother in the next lot (this house is now 1334 Bronson Road). They kept the faith of their ancestors; David, Jane and their children were baptized in the Congregational Church. Jane had her first child within a year, which was the norm. Colonial women had an average of 8 children. Jane had 10; two died immediately and one "died young." She bore children until she was 41.

David Ogden was a dying man when he made out his will on August 21, 1775. Fifteen days later the 48 year old farmer was dead. No letters, diaries, or paintings exist today from the family. Yet David's will, estate inventory and other family documents have been carefully examined to furnish the house appropriately with objects including textiles and fine pieces of furniture with Fairfield provenance. Although no longer surrounded by its original farmland or outbuildings, the Ogden House retains its beautiful situation overlooking Brown's Brook in the fertile Mill River Valley.



An eighteenth-century style herb garden behind the house is laid out symmetrically with raised beds. The garden features herbs typical of those used at the time, and is generously maintained by the Fairfield Garden Club. A bridge across the brook leads to a trail planted with native Connecticut wild flowers and shrubs. Ogden House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Fairfield in the 18th Century

Fairfield was a secure, prosperous and well-established town. By 1756, Fairfield was the fourth largest town by population, second largest by taxable property, including 4,455 people, of that number, 260 were black.

In the 18th century, corn, rye, wheat, potatoes, and flax were the main crops grown for export as well as local consumption. Flax seed was in demand to make linseed oil, and was shipped to Ireland where flax was grown to make fine linen cloth. Local farmers carted their produce to merchants and shippers located along the wharves at Mill River (now Southport) and Black Rock harbor. Bartering was the common method of exchange, and farmers often brought dairy and poultry products such as butter, cheese, eggs, and sacks of feathers to trade for credit.



FLAX!

Flax, the source of linen textiles and linseed oil, was a major export in the 18th century. Both the seeds and processed flax fibers were shipped to England. The first step in processing flax involved breaking the woody outer core of the plants, which had been soaked or “retted” in streams for weeks after harvesting.

At left: Students visiting the Ogden House will see a re-creation of the materials and tools people in colonial times used to spin wool and to turn flax fibers into linen.

Below find excerpts from “Fairfield 1639 – 2000” written by Thomas Farnham for the Fairfield Historical Society and published by Phoenix Publishing in 1988.

“Sheep, hogs, and cattle continued to be important on Fairfield farms. The markets for meat and dairy products remained strong in Boston and especially New York. Grocers in both cities made a point of mentioned the Connecticut origin of their meat, an indication of the colony’s reputation for quality. The early eighteenth century also found more and more horses in Fairfield. The mild climate, abundant feed, and level terrain of coastal Fairfield were ideally suited for horse breeding, and Fairfield horses commanded high prices, both on the mainland and in the West Indies.” (Farnham, page 69)

Mill River – later called Southport was also an important harbor:

“Captain Stephen Thorp of Mill River was typical of the men trading out of that location. His trade was almost exclusively with “York” where he delivered flour, wheat, rum, and “Seader Shingles” and took on a variety of manufactured goods that had been imported from England. Black Rock sent mariners off to more distant ports, neither England nor Europe but Barbados, St. Kitt’s, and St. Thomas, where Connecticut livestock, salted meat, and flour could be traded for West Indian sugar, molasses, rum and salt” (Farnham, page 71).

The Ogden Family

“But a glance at an eighteenth-century estate inventory helps to put that century’s idea of affluence into perspective. David Ogden, who was forty-eight when he died in Fairfield in 1775, was, while not wealthy, a prosperous man; his estate, valued at 1515 pounds, clearly placed him among the most affluent 20% of the town’s population. His houses, milk house, barn, and the 28 acres upon which these structures stood were worth 455 pounds. He owned an additional 72 acres, worth 529 pounds. Ogden, his wife, and their five children lived in a substantial, six-room center chimney house. Their furniture at the time of David’s death consisted of four bedsteads, three looking glasses, a desk, a case of drawers, two round and two square tables, a chest of drawers, a trunk, an old chest, a cradle, a great chair, twelve black chairs, six crookbacked chairs, and five ‘old chairs.’ These items – total value, about 14 pounds – would hardly begin to satisfy the needs of the most humble 20th century family of seven. The Ogdens did not own a single piece of upholstered furniture; upholstered items were reserved for those wealthy enough to import them from Boston or New York.”

“David Ogden’s entire wardrobe would barely fill a modern traveler’s suitcase. He operated a 100 acre farm with fewer tools than modern suburbanites need to maintain an acre lawn, and his wife, Jane Sturges Ogden, had no more dishes and utensils in her kitchen than a modern homemaker could fit in the family dishwasher” (Farnham, pp 74 – 75).