



370 Beach Road, Fairfield, CT 06824
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Learn More About Fairfield County History

Early Agriculture and Maritime Commerce

For nearly 300 years, until the early 20th century, agriculture was the major source of Fairfield's prosperity. 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.

Fairfield's coastal geography provided good harbors, an advantage that created significant wealth in the 18th and 19th centuries through commerce and related maritime industries. Shipbuilding became a profitable business at the deepwater harbor in Black Rock in the early 18th century, with local shipyards known for their fine craftsmanship. Black Rock merchants and shippers conducted a brisk trade with vessels destined for the West Indies, Boston, and New York. Livestock, grains, flax seed, preserved meats, dairy products, lumber, and barrel staves were shipped from Fairfield. Return voyages from the West Indies brought molasses, rum, sugar, and salt, while those from Europe brought luxury goods. Newspapers advertised "newly arrived" items and the goods merchants would accept in exchange. Access to these foreign imports set Fairfield apart from many other towns in the region.

The harbor at Mill River (now Southport) was busy and crowded with smaller vessels destined for New York and ports in southern states. In the mid-19th century Fairfield farmers were raising about 41,250 bushels of globe onions per year, and their output continued to grow. By the 1890s, the number of barrels annually exported from Southport harbor had grown to an impressive 100,000. Warehouses held the onions until ships were ready to sail. Market boats—sloops and schooners—carried barrels of onions, carrots, and potatoes from Southport to New York City from July to September. From October to May, their cargoes were almost entirely onions.

Farmers from atop Mill Hill and Greenfield Hill kept an eye to the harbor for market boats that would carry their produce. When one was spotted, word spread, and lines of loaded carts and wagons soon appeared on the roads into Southport.



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With the opening of western lands where soil was more easily cultivated, agriculture declined in the region. In addition, in the late 1890s, cutworms that could not be eradicated decimated the once-bountiful globe onions, and crop production fell drastically. By the 20th century, mid-western farmers dominated the production of grain crops, although dairy farming continued in New England. In Fairfield, agricultural fairs and membership organizations that had once supported farming and encouraged community pride began to die out. As the years passed, land was valued more for its development potential than for growing crops, and farmland was sold for homes, shopping centers and industry.