

Note to Readers: What follows is not so much a preview of work-in-progress as an impressionistic look back at a document I used in my book, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*. Thomas Minor's diary provided me in that case with a rare glimpse at the actual practice of colonial livestock husbandry. His diary can, however, tell us a lot more than that about colonial agrarian life. Rich as it is, it is also an elusive historical source. This paper is a first attempt to outline some potential ways of using the diary to understand what it meant to be a colonial New England farmer.

### **History in a Minor Key, or, the Life of a Seventeenth-Century New England Farmer**

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*A conscientious journal keeper is really the natural historian of his own life.*  
Verlyn Klinkenborg

[1655] *The secone month is Aprile and hath .30. days sabath day the first and thursday the .5. I made an End of covering the house and Friday the .6. I sowed wheat and saturday the .7. I begun to garden and sabath day the .8. and sabath day the .15. I was at Coneticut and came whome on thursday being the .19. the .13. of this month being friday John began to board with the widow Smith and sabath day the .22. monday .23. I made an end of gardning tusday .24. I sowed hemp and sabath day .29. monday the .30.*

[1671] *The fift moneth is July and hath .31. days the ffirst is saterday we Ended Hilling in the Little orchard: Jaqueneg and his Wife to be reconsiled the .7<sup>th</sup>. day we wer five a hilling and we had the Hay out of the orchard the .8. day saterday the bottom was mowed Enos had the greate Conoow The .10<sup>th</sup>. a towne meeting the .13<sup>th</sup>. Bouls was married the .14<sup>th</sup>. we made an End of Hilling the .15. day saterday at night Mother palmer departed this Life saterday the .22. I had three loade of white pease and Two Loades of oates In to the barne and saterday the .29. it was wet Monday 31. The 24 day wensday samuell was at Crandals mill*

[1683] *The ninth moneth is November hath 30 days Thursday the ffirst and sabath day the .4<sup>th</sup>. mr okes preached at stoneington and Thursday the .8. hanah fetched her sheep the 9. day and Ephraim and Joseph brought the .32. pound of lead we had .42. sheep this 9<sup>th</sup> day the 12 day Monday we ffecthed 4 bushells of Turneps at gershum palmers and Thursday the .15. I was at mil the 16 day we killed our swine Thursday 22. the 25 day we had A Sacrament I was sick*

One of the curious facts about early New England history is that we know more about what happened in meetinghouses on the Sabbath than what transpired on farms the other six days of the week. A survey of the scholarship on New England suggests that delving into the details of colonial agriculture holds fewer attractions for historians than exploring such topics as the intricacies of Puritan belief and practice. On the short shelf of books written about farming in early New England, one principally finds works by authors who lived at a time when agriculture was a more conspicuous part of the regional economy, or who themselves either worked the land or held important positions in local farming organizations.<sup>1</sup> It would, of course, be reductionist to argue that these authors' life experiences dictated their scholarly interests; no one would similarly claim that predestinarian fervor has inspired historians attracted to the study of Puritanism. At the very least, however, some familiarity with agrarian life surely encouraged the select group of writers on New England agriculture to believe that their subject was of historical significance. Whether colonial historians in general would agree that agrarian life matched spiritual matters in importance is a question worth pondering; the evidence would suggest not.

Historians of early modern England, in contrast, have always acknowledged the centrality of agriculture in the lives of the people they study, producing a steady stream of scholarship that explores—often in astonishing detail—when, where, and at what farmers labored. The multi-volume *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, published by Cambridge University Press, stands as a monument to their efforts. Although this was the agrarian society that produced New England's colonists, one can scarcely imagine anyone undertaking a similarly comprehensive *Agrarian History of Colonial New England*, let alone such a volume for colonial America. This apparent indifference to the subject of *agriculture* is all the more curious insofar as colonial historians have never denied the importance of *land*. The so-called “new social

history” of the 1970s explicitly addressed the relationships between people and the land, examining such topics as the distribution of real property within towns and among families, and the inheritance practices that transferred property from one generation to another. What colonists actually *did* with their land (other than bequeathing it), however, was virtually ignored. Even the author who went so far as to label one New England town a “peasant utopia” devoted barely a sentence to what crops those “peasants” grew and, in fact, assumed that they simply followed English practices.<sup>2</sup>

Considerable information about New England agriculture—which did not merely replicate an English model—can be gleaned from tax lists, land deeds, and probate materials. If the goal is not simply to analyze farming from a purely economic perspective, however, but to understand how it shaped the lives of its practitioners, the task becomes more challenging. Finding out what happened on those other six days of the week, when farmers weren’t listening to sermons, requires reconstructing commonplace experiences of daily life that—precisely because they were commonplace—rarely produced the kinds of records upon which historians depend. This is especially true for the seventeenth century, at the start of English settlement in the region. It is thus difficult to recapture the daily routines and practical knowledge that produced the taxable wealth and the bequests to children that official records described.

Fortunately, a remarkable document can help us reconstruct, at least in broad outlines, the life of one seventeenth-century New England farmer and in the process explore key features of agrarian experience. Beginning in 1653, and continuing for the next 31 years, Thomas Minor kept a diary of his activities as a farmer in Stonington, Connecticut. This is the only extant New England farmer’s diary from that era and, as such, it provides a rare glimpse at a world gone by. The diary chronicles the evolution of a farm over the course of three decades, focusing on

precisely those ordinary activities so difficult to discern from other sources. Minor never explained why he chose to keep this record, but as we will see, at least some of his reasons may be inferred from the way in which the document was constructed.<sup>3</sup> Because diaries are by definition highly idiosyncratic accounts, no claim can be made that Minor's experiences represented in every instance those of his fellow colonists. Even so, much of the information in the diary accords with what we know of the general patterns of New England agrarian society, indicating at least that Minor's life was not atypical in any significant way. The document, however, does more than confirm what we already know about colonial farming. Its real value lies in the way it hints at what we do not know. As we follow Minor day by day, month by month, year by year, through a long and vigorous life, we begin to see the world through the eyes of a colonial farmer. What we see is not always what we might have expected.

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Other than in his penchant for diary-keeping, Thomas Minor was an ordinary New Englander. Born in Somersetshire in 1608, he joined the flood of English people moving to New England in the 1630s. Minor took ship in 1632, a 24-year-old bachelor typical in his youth, if somewhat unusual in not traveling as part of a family unit. He did not long remain unattached, for in 1634 he married Grace Palmer. Together they produced seven sons and three daughters over the next 21 years. Like so many other colonists, the Minors moved around—from Charlestown to Hingham in Massachusetts Bay Colony to New London in Connecticut—before settling for good in the coastal village of Stonington near the Rhode Island border.<sup>4</sup>

Minor apparently began his diary only after he had set down roots in Stonington; if there are earlier installments, they have not survived. Interspersed among entries on agrarian life, there are brief notices of personal matters (births, marriages, deaths in the family and in the

community) and public events (elections of local officials, disputes among church members, references to King Philip's War). Minor was personally involved in many of these public concerns. He was elected to a number of local offices, and served several terms as Stonington's representative to the colony legislature. An officer in the local militia, he completed two months of active duty as a 67-year-old captain during the "Indean warr." Minor was also a founding member of the Stonington church, although his relations with fellow congregants were sometimes contentious.<sup>5</sup>

As to private matters, Minor's periodic references to family and community members hint, but only hint, at the significance he attached to being a husband, father, grandfather, and neighbor. He clearly did not regard diary-keeping as an opportunity for introspection. In his entry for 24 January 1661, for instance, Minor tersely recorded that his young daughter Mary "died aboute six oclocke" and "we had 40 bushells of wheat." Minor could not have meant these brief notations to commemorate events of equal importance. The diary was simply no place to express grief, or any other emotion.<sup>6</sup>

Minor instead intended it mainly to be a chronicle of agrarian activities. The vast majority of entries, organized by month, note the particular task or set of tasks undertaken and accomplished. Choosing one month at random, by way of example, one learns that in March 1654, Thomas Minor hewed timber, plowed the wheat land, sowed one field with wheat and another with parsnips, spent a day looking for swine running loose in the woods, and went to look over a nearby farm he contemplated buying.<sup>7</sup> Hundreds of such entries provide the raw data necessary for reconstructing the life of a seventeenth-century farmer.

Like most New Englanders, Minor practiced mixed husbandry, raising a variety of crops and livestock. He mentioned at one time or another growing Indian corn, winter and summer

wheat, rye, oats, white and gray peas, beans, hops, turnips, parsnips, cabbage, and squash.

Because he was not systematic in recording such information, however, the diary does not permit an accurate accounting of crop mixes or yields from one year to the next. If he did not mention a particular crop in a certain year, that does not necessarily mean he did not grow it. Minor occasionally referred to “gardening” in the springtime, but by this he may have meant preparing a plot near the house where his wife and daughters cultivated herbs and vegetables. His orchard yielded apples, most of which he pressed for cider, as well as pears. Minor also grew flax and hemp, used for making cloth and rope. He owned nearly every kind of domesticated livestock: cattle, horses, swine, sheep, and goats. The mix of animals, however, changed over time as Minor balanced subsistence needs and market opportunities against the costs of fodder and care. A June 1662 diary entry, for instance, contains the rather disconcerting statement that “we had all our kids killed”—perhaps because goats had a nasty habit of chewing on apple trees. The family also kept beehives for honey.<sup>0</sup>

This listing of crops and animals gives a distinct impression of dietary variety and abundance, and yet it offers only a partial accounting of the Minor farm’s productivity. Like many contemporary male diarists, Thomas Minor dwelled upon his own concerns, and failed to record directly the activities of his wife and daughters. At least some of their contributions may be inferred from scattered diary entries. The butter and cheese that Thomas occasionally traded with neighbors represented the labor of his wife and daughters. Grace Minor probably brewed beer from the homegrown hops; Thomas never mentioned doing so. The family almost certainly kept poultry for meat and eggs, although the diary is silent with regard to this additional aspect of women’s work.<sup>9</sup>

The Minors produced much of what they consumed, but not everything. No New

England farm could claim self-sufficiency. Thomas Minor often made note of necessities he had to obtain through purchase or exchange: salt, sugar, molasses, cloth, cotton, pewter, iron, glass, nails, tools used in weaving, shoes, horseshoes, harness, and—though these were perhaps not necessities—green ginger and rum. For the most part, Minor paid for these goods with farm produce—trading butter for pewter and shoes, for instance, or corn for molasses. Some, though not all, such exchanges occurred locally. Minor and his sons frequently traveled ten or twenty miles westward along the coast to take advantage of markets in New London and Saybrook, port towns better supplied than rural Stonington with imported goods.<sup>10</sup>

In one respect, Minor engaged more heavily in the market than did many of his neighbors. In the late 1650s, he started raising horses for sale. Either he or his sons drove the animals overland to Narragansett Bay, where merchants bought them to ship to the West Indies to work in sugar mills. It was on one such trip in April 1662 that 21-year-old Thomas, Jr., fell ill “as he was looking the mares.” Within two weeks, he was dead, prompting a characteristically laconic diary entry by his father, who had gone to Rhode Island to check on him: “satterday the 19 Thomas departed (this life) . . . he buried The 22 [April].” Two days later, Thomas, Sr., returned to Stonington. Although he betrayed no emotion in his diary, one can imagine that grief clouded his mind as he resumed tasks that could not be ignored or postponed. It was time to sow oats and wheat.<sup>11</sup>

If the labor demands of the Minor farm were unrelenting, who—besides Thomas—performed the work? Minor was blessed with a large and generally healthy brood of children, who comprised his principal labor force. This reliance upon sons and daughters was typical of seventeenth-century New England farmers, whose mixed husbandry provided neither the incentive nor the income to employ workers on anything like the scale seen on Chesapeake

tobacco plantations or anywhere else where staple-crop agriculture developed. By the time the Minors arrived in Stonington around 1653, Grace had given birth to nine of the ten children, including all seven sons. The two oldest boys, John and Clement, at ages eighteen and fifteen, were already able to contribute significantly to the family economy.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout his diary, Thomas Minor distinguished between work “I” performed and tasks that “we” accomplished, revealing aspects of the division of men’s and boys’ labor on the farm. At first, the father did much of the work, especially the more strenuous duties: cutting and gathering hay, hedging, plowing, fetching cattle from distant pastures, looking for lost and unruly swine. “We”—presumably Thomas and his teenaged sons—threshed corn, dressed hemp, gathered turnips, slaughtered pigs. By the time Thomas had reached his sixties, and his sons were in their twenties and thirties, “we” did a lot more of the work: mowing, threshing, planting, plowing, slaughtering all sorts of livestock, driving cattle and horses. Cooperation persisted long after the sons married and moved to their own nearby farms. Father and sons cultivated each others’ lands, pastured their animals together, and traveled together to market. (On one such visit to the town of Stratford, Thomas embarrassed his sons by “takeing a Cup of Sider to[o] much” on the return trip.) In his last years, work roles reversed. Now the elderly Thomas performed tasks for his sons; he “gathered our hops” (September 1680), threshed Samuel’s wheat (January 1681) and Manasseh’s barley (January 1683). Minor worked most closely in his final years with his youngest son, Samuel, who was to inherit the home farm in return for tending to the needs of his aging parents—a common pattern in early New England. But these plans went awry when Samuel died in 1683; the second youngest son, Manasseh, took his brother’s place.<sup>13</sup>

Minor occasionally could spare his sons to let them work for others, though never more than one son at a time. Between the ages of 19 and 21, John worked for three different



employers. Thomas and Manasseh, while in their late teens, likewise labored for short stints off the family farm. Clement left home to learn weaving, and spent several months working in New London.<sup>14</sup> Although sending sons out like this was hardly unprecedented, Minor's willingness to dispense with his sons' labor when they were finally able to do a man's work is nevertheless curious. The diary's silence on the matter only invites speculation. Might the sons have sought ways, at least temporarily, to avoid working alongside a cantankerous father? The fact that Minor scarcely ever seemed to engage in communal work with his neighbors also hints at a difficult personality, although he did get along with townsmen well enough for them to trust him with local and colony officeholding. Only rarely did Minor supplement family labor with hired help to fulfill specific tasks, such as trimming cider barrels or building a stone wall or a porch.<sup>15</sup> Frequently his hired hands were Indians, engaged to pull weeds, build a chimney, keep cattle, or hunt wolves. Much of Minor's public service involved mediating colonial relations with native peoples, a responsibility that gave him special access to this pool of potential laborers.<sup>16</sup>

Minor seldom worked for others, but when he did so, he acted as an independent contractor—an arrangement that would not compromise his status as family patriarch. His principal activity in this regard was wintering other people's cattle on his farm. In one instance, he arranged to mow another man's meadow in return for permission to keep cattle on that land the following winter. Minor typically entered into these arrangements during the 1650s, probably as a way of supplementing the family income as he established his own farm. Only rarely did he perform other kinds of work—building a hedge for one neighbor, threshing wheat for another. These latter instances may not have been hired jobs at all, but exchanges of work, or perhaps help for an invalid friend.<sup>17</sup>

Minor's diary is especially valuable in revealing something of *how* he and his sons

farmed. We gain, for instance, a keen appreciation of the difficulty not only of running a farm, but setting one up from scratch. Like most first-generation New England colonists, Minor received the original land for his farm free, as a grant from the town. This, however, was just the beginning; converting a land grant into a working farm was a slow process that consumed years of labor. Minor obviously needed to procure seeds and livestock, and he spent a great deal of time during the 1650s cutting down trees to clear planting fields. During the two days he spent plowing in December 1653, Minor quite likely trudged with his oxen across fields that had never been plowed before, breaking up the soil and turning up the inevitable stones that comprised every New Englander's first harvest.<sup>18</sup> He and his sons not only built a house, barn, and "littel house," but also fashioned the building materials used in construction. They fetched stones—no doubt from their planting fields—for the hearth and cut thatch for the house and barn roofs. They split what must have seemed an infinite number of clapboards, carved bolts, made daub for the walls. Thomas dug the cellar, and his sons helped him to line the walls with stone. Five and a half years passed between the time he mentioned raising the roof of the house (15 October 1654) to when he finished shingling the north side (10-11 May 1660). And for every fence Minor erected around his arable land or the winter livestock pens, he first had to cut the pales he needed.<sup>19</sup>

The diary further reveals that the Minors, like many early New England colonists, adapted to frontier conditions by farming extensively. Because land was cheaper and more abundant than either labor or capital, colonists initially preferred to clear new lands rather than invest time and energy in more intensive cultivation of existing planting fields. Over the years, Thomas Minor augmented his original land grant by buying a neighboring farm and accepting additional grants from the colony as recompense for public service. Extensive practices

especially characterized his style of livestock husbandry, which utilized large tracts of undeveloped land and minimized his investment of labor. Minor kept most of his livestock on the farm only from about November to April, when grazing animals required fodder to survive the harsh New England winters. The rest of the year, he moved his cattle and horses to distant pastures where they grazed under minimal (if any—the diary does not say) supervision on natural meadows. Along with other farmers in the area, he pastured sheep on Fishers Island. Using islands in this way was a common practice: either they were already free of predators like wolves or could be made so. Minor’s swine—the hardiest of New England livestock—foraged at large pretty much year-round. This kind of livestock husbandry did have certain disadvantages. It was sometimes difficult to keep track of precisely how many animals one owned. It also might take days of searching to locate animals that had gone missing. On 8 February 1654, for instance, Minor “looked for the mare;” six weeks later, he “looked for the swine.” That September, he noted that he “had lost the cattell at Mistucksset.” On the whole, however, the disadvantages of colonial farming practices affected Indians far more directly. They repeatedly suffered damage to their cornfields from trespassing livestock, and endured incessant colonial requests for more pasture land.<sup>20</sup>

If Thomas Minor had to adjust to the exigencies of frontier conditions, he nevertheless understood the importance of making his farm sustainable for the long term. His steady accumulation of property and longstanding cooperation with his sons bespoke a desire to establish the Minor clan in the area for generations to come. This goal inspired him to adopt certain practices not always credited to early New England farmers. Whenever possible, for instance, Minor employed techniques well known to English farmers as ways to conserve soil fertility. The most obvious method was applying manure to his planting fields. Seventeenth-

century New England farmers had access only to the manure deposited near the home lot by livestock penned for the winter, but they made good use of what they had. In late October or November, the Minors carted “muck” that animals had produced the previous winter out to planting fields; letting it cure in the yard for the better part of the year before using it helped to eliminate weed seeds. The following spring, they would spread it on selected arable lands just before sowing crops. A couple of times, Minor mentioned burning fields in March, amending the soil with ashes.<sup>21</sup>

From late spring until autumn, Minor’s livestock grazed on natural meadows. Native grasses may have been less nutritious than the hay available in English pastures, but they had the signal virtue of growing on their own, without human attention. Colonists, especially in the early years of settlement, had enough to do without adding the improvement of forage to their list of duties—especially when native hay was so abundant. On two occasions, however, Thomas Minor made note of his efforts to amend the quality of his animals’ diet. In December 1653, he fenced in a plot of clover, and he spent a day in June 1658 sowing hay seed. He may have been inspired to make these improvements by neighboring Rhode Islanders who, because they were more heavily engaged in commercial livestock husbandry than other New Englanders, led the way in importing clover and other English grass seeds.<sup>22</sup>

English colonists seldom looked to Indians as models for agricultural practice, so that was probably not the inspiration for another of Minor’s ventures: growing different crops at the same time on the same plot of land. He did not adopt the native pattern of cultivating corn, beans, and squash together, but in at least one instance (1 August 1665), Minor reported that “I sowed Turneps among the squashes.” On other occasions, he planted peas and hemp in his orchard. Mixing crops was not unknown in England; sowing wheat and rye together was a

common practice, and peas were sometimes interplanted with oats or beans. Minor's efforts marked a departure from these more familiar pairings, however, and thus suggest his willingness to experiment. His goal may simply have been weed control, or there may have been other practical advantages that, at a distance of more than three centuries, are now hard to fathom.<sup>23</sup>

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Thus far, this examination of Minor's diary has confirmed, rather than altered, the basic outlines of what we know about colonial New England agrarian life. More than anything, it describes with unusual detail how one man strove to achieve and maintain competency: a comfortable independence rooted in landownership. For the Minors, as for virtually all New Englanders, this goal was attainable only through the collective labors of family members as well as a degree of cooperation among neighbors within each community. The productive capacity of the family farm formed a key element of success, but engagement in the market or in non-agricultural activities was acceptable so long as families (and especially fathers) avoided dependence on outside employers, creditors, or landlords. Minor, for instance, supplemented his farming by working in a mill he owned—or perhaps in which he owned a share—for about a decade. The diary, particularly by recording Minor's lifelong and intensive interaction with his sons, also underscores the patriarch's long-range goal of ensuring that his children remained comfortable and independent after his own death.<sup>24</sup>

Minor's diary, however, can tell us more than this about the six working days of each New England farmer's week. Unlike other kinds of sources about agrarian practice, this one—because it was produced by a single individual over such a long span of time—invites us to delve beneath the surface details of what Minor did and when he did it to explore the nature of seventeenth-century agrarian life as lived experience. While Minor's laconic style of notation

precludes a thorough reconstruction of that experience, he revealed enough of himself to suggest how he might have made sense of the world in which he lived and toiled.

First, Minor's diary testifies to the fact that becoming a successful farmer was less an intuitive process than the product of experience. This was especially true for first-generation colonial farmers who had to sift through their English agrarian practices (if indeed they had been farmers in England) and ascertain what could and could not be transplanted to a new setting.<sup>25</sup> New England's environment and temperate climate were similar but not identical to conditions in the home country. Among other accommodations, colonial farmers had to alter their style of livestock husbandry, adopt Indian corn as their principal cereal, switch from growing barley for beer to raising apples for cider, and adapt to different soil mixes and weather patterns.<sup>26</sup> Thomas Minor's detailed notations provided him, and us, with a record of his ongoing practical education as a New England farmer. By writing down when and where he planted crops, cut hay, or moved livestock, he kept track of practices that could be repeated if they worked, or changed if they did not.

In this vein, the diary also served as a kind of personalized almanac, an annual account of meteorological (and occasionally astronomical) events applicable to this one Stonington farm. Minor never mentioned when it was sunny or hot; nor did he regularly record precipitation. He was, however, diligent about noting snowstorms and bouts of "frostie" weather, which were far more frequent in New England than England. He nearly always recorded the first snowfall of the year—an important date for a farmer to remember, especially if he wanted to let his livestock graze at large for as much of the autumn as possible. In extraordinarily inclement years Minor kept count of the number of storms; in the first week of March 1670, for instance, he wearily reported that "we have had 26 snows" since the previous October. Minor likewise made note of

days when rain interfered with haying, planting, or harvesting—information that might later help account for poor yields. Electrical storms merited a comment, as did the “greate” storms (almost certainly hurricanes) that often struck in late August.<sup>27</sup>

Such entries, keeping track of agricultural activities and the conditions under which they were performed, helped Minor to navigate season by season through the years. This, surely, was the main reason why he decided to keep a diary of this sort in the first place—a document that focused almost exclusively on what he did rather than what he thought. Its pages allowed him to draw on knowledge of the past to help plan for the next year. This may explain why the entries ceased rather abruptly in February 1685 although Thomas lived until 1690. It may be that the spring of 1685 marked the end of his career as an active farmer, and thus the usefulness—to him—of the diary. It was a precious resource, however, for posterity and especially for his son Manasseh as he took over the family farm.<sup>28</sup>

Learning how best to manage a New England farm, however, did not necessarily mean that the job became easier over time. A second notable feature of the diary is the way it bears witness to the hard physical labor that farming entailed. It reminds us that agrarian tasks exacted a toll on the people who performed them, that assets listed in an inventory or enumerated on a tax list involved hidden costs in human energy and, often, health. Minor may not have deemed his diary a suitable venue for describing his emotional state, but he had no compunctions about filling it with a record of his many corporeal aches and pains. He was plagued by back trouble, which was exacerbated by the strenuous duties he had to fulfill. Several days spent threshing wheat and peas in February 1662 rendered him “verie lame in my back;” slaughtering swine and a steer in December 1676 brought on a similar attack. So too did cutting and carting salt hay in September 1684; the fact that Minor was then 76 years old evidently did not exempt him from

such work. Gathering apples brought on shoulder pain, and in the autumn of 1677, Minor suffered from a dislocated shoulder for a month before it could be set.<sup>29</sup>

From the vantage point of the present, we know that colonial New Englanders—especially the first-generation settlers—were an admirably sturdy lot, reaching ages that would have been the envy of any of their European contemporaries. Those who, like Minor, migrated during the 1630s were already a self-selected healthy group since the rigors of colonization attracted few invalids. An astonishing number of these first colonists lived to their seventies and eighties.<sup>30</sup> However, Minor's own perspective, as it informed his diary entries, allowed for no complacency on matters of endurance and longevity. Whenever he commented on family-related topics other than work, it was often illness that preoccupied him. Fourteen-year-old Ephraim was hurt with a cart in 1656 and nine months later had the ague. Joseph caught the measles in the winter of 1658; the following year, wife Grace had “that fit of sicknes with the Redspots” (scarlet fever?). Indeed, whenever Thomas referred to his wife in the diary, his most consistent theme was illness and injury. Grace was evidently more prone to sickness than her husband and, as she grew older, especially vulnerable to such accidents as falling off her horse or out of canoes.<sup>31</sup>

If Thomas suffered less frequently from bouts of illness, he nevertheless endured two lengthy periods of significant incapacitation. The first such episode began when he fell ill on 11 October 1658. He could not go “abroad” until 5 December, and even then “everie night continued burning and weake.” Only on 15 December was he able to do a little work. For more than nine weeks, the rest of the family had to assume responsibility for running the farm. It is possible that Minor suffered in this instance from malaria. John Hull, a Boston merchant, reported in September 1658 that many people in his town and throughout southern New England complained of “fevers and agues,” terms often used by contemporaries to describe pernicious



malaria. In late August 1683, as Minor's active career as a farmer was winding down, he once again "was taken sick and continued so Eight weekes and was wholly lost"—possibly a recurrence of his former malady. Despairing of his life, he could not know that he would recover and live seven more years, to age 82.<sup>32</sup>

Although keeping a diary may have signified a desire to impose some order on his working life, Minor's frequent references to physical frailty testified to his keen sense of the limits of human control over the vagaries of daily existence. He knew that the best-laid plans, whether they applied to farming or any other aspect of life, were all too easily disrupted by disease, accident, bad weather or just plain bad luck. Even in the prime of his life, Minor could not refrain from reflecting on his own mortality. No fewer than three versions of his last will and testament appear in the diary. What drove the forty-five-year-old Minor to compose the first one on 8 February 1654, remains a mystery. According to the diary entries nearest to that date, he was busy plowing and cutting timber, not the sort of activities that would necessarily invite thoughts of the world to come. The impetus behind the second will, dated 21 October 1667, is more straightforward: Minor wanted to set his affairs to rights lest "I never returne from Bostowne" where he was going to sell cattle. By the time he composed the third version in June 1679, Minor was 71 years old, and may have regarded every additional day as an undeserved blessing. By that point in his life, having provided his older sons with property, he was eager to confirm the disposition of the remainder of his estate to his youngest son, in return for Samuel's willingness to "carie on the affaiers of the house in myne and his mothers weaknes."<sup>33</sup>

As he grew older, Thomas Minor began recording the passage of time in a different way, adding a new linear dimension to his cyclical chronicle of seasonal agricultural rhythms. Beginning on 23 April 1670—when he turned 62—and continuing nearly every year thereafter,

Minor made note of his birthday. The references were never elaborate; a simple mention of the event sufficed. On 23 April 1673, for instance, he merely noted that “I was 65 years old wensday” between references to sowing oats and taking care of a mare. Their brevity notwithstanding, such notations arguably marked a shift in Minor’s perception of himself and his world. The aging farmer who in 1676 had to purchase some “specttecles”—perhaps to make it easier to write in his diary?—had begun to confront his own mortality in a systematic way.<sup>34</sup> Remembering his birthday was less an occasion for celebration than for marking his progress through a life of unknown duration. It was easy to calculate the years as they passed, but why did Minor start doing so at this time, and why did he choose to keep count in a diary otherwise devoted to the daily chores of farming?

Since Minor characteristically refrained from explaining the significance he might have attached to this new feature of the diary, we can only speculate. But it hardly seems coincidental that he began commemorating his birthday just as his youngest children approached adulthood and when he himself felt more often the aches and pains of growing older. April was also the month when snowstorms in New England gave way to rain, thawing ground could be plowed and planted, livestock could be sent to graze in newly green pastures. Did Minor silently contrast his completion of another year with the commencement of a new agricultural cycle? In looking back as well as forward, did he use the occasion of his birthday to take stock of what he had accomplished during his life up to that point?

If he did so, by what standards would Minor have measured his success as a farmer? This general topic has attracted the attention of historians interested in assessing colonial farmers’ economic goals or, more broadly, their *mentalité*. Scholarly interpretations differ somewhat, although they fall within a relatively narrow spectrum. Colonial farmers are depicted

as more or less interested in the relentless accumulation of property. They are described either as focused principally on individualistic goals or as more concerned with the long-term economic security of their lineal descendants. Perhaps the most satisfactory approach to the issue adopts a cultural rather than strictly economic perspective—incorporating material, patriarchal, political, and even religious factors into an interpretation in which family independence, defined in the broadest sense, became the goal of a life's work.<sup>35</sup> Minor's diary implicitly addresses these themes from the vantage point of an individual who clearly cared a great deal about his life as a farmer. Given the ubiquity of references to his children, he took seriously his role as patriarch and provider not just of property for himself but for the next generation. The frequent revision of his will testified to his desire to keep up with the changing needs of his family as his children matured and their material needs evolved. The diary, in short, suggests that when it came to farming Minor did not discern a meaningful distinction between his own welfare and that of his family.

By the time he began to take note of his birthdays, Minor could have stood on his doorstep and gazed out at his fields, orchards, and pastures—at the fruits of a lifetime of work creating a productive farm from an undeveloped land grant. If he ever engaged in such an exercise, however, he probably did not resort to economic measures of success in any conventional sense to evaluate the results of his labors. Even though he often specified the quantities of crops produced—45 bushels of turnips harvested in October 1657, 450 sheaves of oats cut in August 1665, and so on—he did not do so in a systematic way that invited a quantitative comparison of yields from one year to the next. He never speculated about future levels of production. While he clearly aimed to wrest a comfortable living from the land, his diary offers no evidence of a desire to maximize profits, to see if another 10 sheaves of oats

could be produced in that same field the next year. The fruits of his labors, so long as there was enough to sustain his family, mattered less to Minor than the work itself. He employed these occasional quantitative notations to calculate the amount of labor expended rather than to boast of the result produced. His characteristic locution was to write that “I made an end of mowing of 31 loads of hay” (7 September 1657), the number of loads serving to illustrate the magnitude of the task accomplished. Such phrasing suggests that he conceived of his daily routine as a progression of small victories over essential tasks. More than anything else, at the end of the day Minor wanted to be able to report in his diary that he had put in a hard day’s work, whatever his specific activities had been.

Minor could hardly have been oblivious to matters of profit and loss, but they clearly did not define his working life. The diary instead records the activities of a man who equated success with perseverance. Getting through another day, doing what needed to be done no matter what the weather or what aches and pains plagued him—this was what deserved memorialization in each scrawled entry, not a steady reckoning of bushels harvested or shillings earned from one year to the next. To the extent that Minor’s diary reflected his daily experience, it suggests a life lived largely in the present. Each season had its prescribed work, and although the cycle would repeat year after year, what was important was what had been accomplished on any one particular day.

Both cultural and historical factors shaped Thomas Minor’s conception of farming. His emphasis on the dignity of labor—especially his own labor—was surely reinforced by the fact that he worked for himself on his own land. The patriarchal assumptions of his era put the labor of his wife and children at his disposal, and they too understood what it meant to earn one’s living by the sweat of one’s brow. Reading between the lines of Minor’s laments about interminable

winter “snows,” one senses that his frustration was directed less against the elements themselves than against enforced inactivity. The diary depicts a man who seemingly did not know how to relax, although that impression may in good part derive from the fact that he aimed to chronicle his working life. The Sabbath was the prescribed day of rest—and that was the one day of the week Minor rarely discussed in any detail. That silence notwithstanding, readers of the diary gain a new appreciation of what a day of rest must have meant to Minor, once they know how he spent the other days of the week.

The Puritan culture of early New England framed Minor’s approach to work in other ways too. The colonists’ calendar was stripped clean of the holidays that offered English people more frequent respite from their workaday lives. New England ministers equated idleness with sin and while they saw nothing wrong with members of their flocks aspiring to a degree of comfort, they continually warned about the temptations of wealth and worldliness.<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Minor never employed the language of “calling” or vocation in reference to his labors. That does not necessarily mean that he perceived no spiritual dimension to his daily work, only that the immediacy of the task and the physical challenge involved appeared to be in the forefront of his mind.

Providentialist ideas, which ascribed to divine intervention any number of unforeseen events, surely enhanced Minor’s attentiveness to illness and death in his family and floods and blizzards in his surroundings. If he had to deal in a practical way with their consequences, he was also obliged to engage in spiritual reflection about their causes. Belief in a “world of wonders,” an uneasy mixture of providentialism with a curiosity about omens and portents derived from a deeper folkloric background, directed Minor’s attention to lunar eclipses and the occasional glimpse of a “Blasing star” in the night sky, although he never used the diary to

speculate about their meaning.<sup>37</sup> This set of spiritual ideas surely resonated with particular force among farmers accustomed to coping with unpredictable natural events, experience and belief reinforcing one another on a regular basis.

Although the topic of agrarian life has not seemed particularly interesting to most colonial historians, this exploration of Thomas Minor's diary reveals its centrality to colonial New Englanders' sense of their own identity. The best evidence of this is the diary itself. At the end of his exhausting days, in the dim light of a flickering candle, Thomas Minor felt compelled to set pen to paper in order to record what he, as a farmer, had accomplished. The fact that he kept at it for three decades bears eloquent witness to a profound desire to memorialize his working life. Conventional histories might label him as a Puritan, a landowner, an officeholder, a patriarch. But in the pages of his diary, he identified himself first and foremost as a farmer. The impulse to write may have made Minor unusual, but what he wrote about were the tasks and worries that filled the days of virtually all seventeenth-century New Englanders. To ignore this central aspect of their lives in the writing of history is to describe a world that colonists surely would not recognize as their own.

Embedded as it was in a specific historical context, Thomas Minor's life as a seventeenth-century Connecticut farmer nevertheless speaks to themes that transcend place and time. To some extent, all those who make their living by farming would recognize themselves in the terse notations of the diary's pages. They would agree that, even with the latest scientific and technological advances, agriculture remains a delicate partnership between humans and a capricious Nature. More than anything else, perhaps, they would understand that farming—no matter when or where it takes place—is *hard work*. Thomas Minor surely meant for his diary to be read only by himself and perhaps his sons, not by scholars who live in a very different world.

But its pages offer modern readers a valuable lesson. To understand fully the world in which Thomas Minor and other New England colonists lived, it is not enough to calculate acres owned, taxes paid, goods acquired, children produced, nor to dwell on explications of the sermons that were undeniably important to them. We also need to pause now and then, and imagine sweat trickling on our brows, an ache in our shoulders, a dull pain in our backs, if we seek to recapture what agrarian life meant to those whose time on earth was shaped by its relentless demands and unpredictable rewards.

## Notes

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1. See, for instance, Percy Wells Bidwell and John I. Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620-1860* (Washington, D.C., 1941); Howard S. Russell, *A Long, Deep Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England* (Hanover, N.H., 1976); Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven and London, 2004). Bidwell taught economics, not history, at Yale in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Howard Russell worked in farm insurance and was president of the Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation. Donahue, a professor of environmental studies at Brandeis, worked for more than a decade on a community farm in Weston, Massachusetts. One exception to this point is Daniel Vickers, author of *Farmers & Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630-1850* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994) and several articles on agrarian labor.
  2. Two key examples of the “new social history” are Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca and London, 1970) and Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York, 1970); for “peasant utopia” see p. 19, and the list of crops see p. 70.
  3. Sidney H. Miner and George D. Stanton, Jr., eds., *The Diary of Thomas Minor, Stonington, Connecticut, 1653 to 1684*, (New London, Ct., 1899). Hereafter cited as *Diary*.
  4. Robert Charles Anderson, *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620-1633*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1995), 1: 1262-67; two of the Minors’ daughters died before reaching adulthood. For an overview of the movement of English people to New England, see Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *New England’s Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1991), esp. chs. 1, 3.
  5. Anderson, *Great Migration Begins*, II: 1262-63.
  6. With its combination of reticence and detail, Minor’s diary resembles that of Martha Ballard, analyzed with such exquisite skill by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York, 1990).
  7. *Diary*, 8.
  - 0.8. *Diary*, passim; p. 51 for kids and p. 172 for bees. For more general discussions of mixed husbandry in colonial New England, see Bidwell and Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States*, chs. 1-2; Russell, *A Long, Deep Furrow*, chs. 4-5; Darrett B. Rutman, *Husbandmen of Plymouth: Farms and Villages in the Old Colony, 1620-1692* (Boston, 1967).
  9. On the gendered perspective of men’s diaries, see Ulrich, *Midwife’s Tale*, 31, 92-93. For



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examples of Thomas Minor trading butter and cheese, see *Diary*, 24, 25, 30, 41-2, 54-5, 58-9, 84, 123, 131, 141. On the presence of poultry on New England farms, see Russell, *Long, Deep Furrow*, 38, 96. Ulrich notes that Martha Ballard brewed; see *Midwife's Tale*, 73, 264, 313. For a discussion of colonial New Englanders' diet, see Sarah F. McMahon, "A Comfortable Subsistence: The Changing Composition of Diet in Rural New England, 1620-1840," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 42 (1985), 26-65; James E. McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America* (New York, 2005), ch.2.

10. *Diary*, 15, 26, 30, 33, 34, 46, 50, 54-55, 70, 72, 82, 91, 102, 112, 115, 138, 141, 143, 147, 151. See also Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, "Self-Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 41 (1984): 333-64.

11. *Diary*, 49-50; see also Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (New York, 2004), 226-27; Daniel A. Romani, Jr., "The Pettaquamscutt Purchase of 1657/58 and the Establishment of a Commercial Livestock Industry in Rhode Island," in Peter Benes, ed., *New England's Creatures: 1400-1900* (Boston, 1995), 45-60.

12. One daughter, Ann, died at age 3 in 1652. Two other children died young, though not before they could help out on the farm. Thomas, Jr., died in 1662 shortly before his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday; Mary died at 15 in 1666. Anderson, *Great Migration Begins*, II, 1264-65. For a discussion of the reliance upon family labor in early New England, see Vickers, *Farmers & Fishermen*, ch. 2.

13. *Diary*, passim; quote on p. 110; working for sons, pp. 162, 170, 181. Minor's will, dated 1679, mentions the bequest to Samuel; pp. 209-10. See also Vickers, *Farmers & Fishermen*, 64-77; Greven, *Four Generations*, 84-88.

14. *Diary*, 11, 14, 16, 23, 33, 39, 69.

15. *Diary*, 11, 104-06, 129-30.

16. *Diary*, 40, 44, 51, 117, 149, 171, 173; Anderson, *Great Migration Begins*, II, 1262. Minor occasionally served as a translator in dealings with Indians and his son John may have been trained to do the same; see Frances Manwaring Caulkins, *History of New London, Connecticut, From the First Survey of the Coast in 1612, to 1852* (New London, 1860), 103, 129.

17. *Diary*, 6, 18, 28-29 [wintering cattle, cutting hay]; 24 [hedging]; 38 [threshing wheat]. On the goal of maintaining patriarchal independence, see Daniel Vickers, "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 47 (1990): 3-29.

18. *Diary*, 6. For the land grant system, see Anderson, *New England's Generation*, ch. 3.

19. *Diary*, 11, 17, 18, 20, 23, 26, 27, 29, 35, 48, 57-58, 60, 65, 78, 79. Although he does not

mention this in the diary, Minor may well have worked with a skilled carpenter in erecting his house; few colonists built their own dwellings by themselves. See Abbott Lowell Cummings, *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625-1725* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), ch. 4.

20. Anderson, *Great Migration Begins*, II, 1263; *Diary*, passim, quotes on pp. 7, 8, 10, and for other examples of lost livestock, see pp. 20, 25, 26, 28, 46, 49, 59, 60, 90, 117, 122, 125, 129, 133, 152, 158. For colonial New England livestock husbandry and the consequences for Indians, see Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, ch. 5-6. On New Englanders' extensive husbandry, see Daniel Vickers, "The Northern Colonies: Economy and Society, 1600-1775," in Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States*, 2 vols. (New York and Cambridge, 1996), I: 226-27.

21. *Diary*, 34, 37, 42, 81, 87, 93, 99, 106, 120, 138, 140, 172 [manure]; 116, 140 [burning]. On the need to let manure cure, see John Worlidge, *Systema Agriculturae; The Mystery of Husbandry Discovered*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, 1687), 69-70. In *The Great Meadow*, Brian Donahue emphasizes the sustainability of colonial New Englanders' agrarian practices.

22. *Diary*, 6, 29. See also Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 154-55; Russell, *Long, Deep Furrow*, 128-30; Daniel A. Romani, Jr., "'Our English Clover-grass sown thrives very well': The Importation of English Grasses and Forages into Seventeenth Century New England," in Peter Benes, ed., *Plants and People: 1995 Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife* (Boston, 1996), 25-37.

23. *Diary*, 67, 68 [quote], 83. For English practices, see Joan Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1500-1640*, gen. ed. H. P. R. Finberg, vol. IV (Cambridge, 1967), 168-69, 171.

24. Vickers, *Farmers & Fishermen*, 14-23; Vickers, "Competency and Competition," 3-29. For Minor's mill, see *Diary*, 6, 12, 13, 16, 19, 20, 21, 60. This may have been a gristmill, although the diary does not make this clear.

25. Many New England emigrants had worked as artisans before moving to New England; see N. C. P. Tyack, "Migration from East Anglia to New England Before 1660" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1951), Appendix III; Anderson, *New England's Generation*, 31-32, 224; Alison Games, *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* (Cambridge and London, 1999), 51-52, esp. Table 2.4.

26. Anderson, *New England's Generation*, 149-57; Donahue, *Great Meadow*, 79.

27. *Diary*, passim.

28. Manasseh Minor also kept a diary; see Frank Denison Miner and Hannah Miner, eds., *The Diary of Manasseh Minor, Stonington, Conn. 1696-1720* (n.p., 1915).

29. *Diary*, 49, 52, 53, 137, 139, 145, 185.

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30. Greven, *Four Generations*, 26; John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York, 1970), 193; Anderson, *New England's Generation*, 180-82, 225.
31. *Diary*, 21, 25, 27, 37, and passim.
32. *Diary*, 31-32, 180; John Hull, "The Diaries of John Hull, Mint-master and Treasurer of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay," *Archaeologia Americana: Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society*, 3 (1857): 184; John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge, 1953), 206-07.
33. *Diary*, 7, 200, 203-04.
34. *Diary*, 95, 117, 128, 135, 137 [spectacles], 141, 148, 154, 160, 166, 172, 183.
35. James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 35 (1978): 3-32; T. H. Breen, "Back to Sweat and Toil: Suggestions for the Study of Agricultural Work in Early America," *Pennsylvania History*, 49 (1982): 241-58; Vickers, "Competency and Competition," and his *Farmers & Fishermen*, ch. 2.
36. See, for instance, Stephen Foster, *Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England* (New Haven and London, 1971), ch. 4.
37. Minor twice mentioned the appearance of a blazing star, and once noted a lunar eclipse; see *Diary*, 41, 65, 67. See also David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989).