Colonial Poultry Husbandry Around the Chesapeake Bay

by

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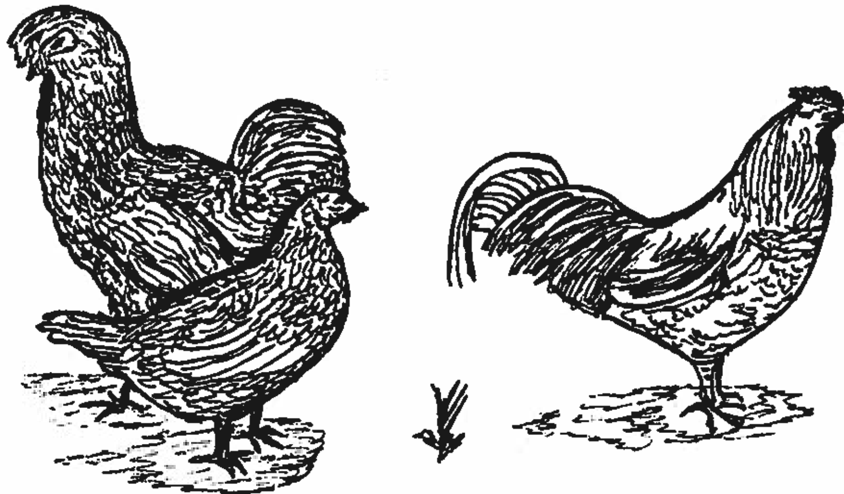

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COLONIAL POULTRY HUSBANDRY AROUND THE CHESAPEAKE BAY

When Europeans first arrived on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, they found an area of rich natural resources, which were virtually untapped. A century later, when colonists seriously interested in settlement came to the region, the situation was little altered. Virgin forests, unmatched wildlife, great stores of native fruits and nuts, and plentiful fish caught their immediate attention. Among the great assets of the North American continent was the abundance of wild fowl, particularly bountiful around the Chesapeake Bay. The myriad creeks, tall reeds, and grasses which characterized the area were an ideal habitat for wildlife, especially water-fowl. The climate spanned the range of both the northern and southern species, making the area especially rich in different varieties of birds. In addition, native Americans encouraged the presence of game fowl by burning off the forest underbrush, and allowing it to grow up in grass. This provided excellent food for the native turkey, as well as chicken-like birds, such as partridges. The result was an unparalleled source of both water and field fowl, so rich that it constituted one of the major advantages of the area.

Faced with flocks of geese which darkened the sky, or ducks which could be killed by the score with a single shot, many colonial writers exclaimed over the abundance of birds. George Alsop wrote from Maryland, soon after its colonization, that the area supported turkeys, geese, pheasants, partridges, and woodcocks "in millionous multitudes."[1] A few years later, Jasper Danckaerts was astonished when traveling through the area to find that there were even more wild fowl than around his home on Long Island. While staying with a planter near Annapolis he noted that ducks were so prevalent that a child of twelve brought down eighteen with one shot, using only a homemade slingshot. "I must not forget to mention the great number of wild geese we saw here on the river," he continued.

> They rose not in flocks of ten or twelve, or twenty, or thirty, but continuously, wherever we pushed our way; and as they made room for us, there was such incessant chattering made with their wings upon the water where they rose, and such a noise of those flying higher up, that it was as if we were all the time surrounded by a whirlwind or storm. This proceeded not only from geese, but from ducks and other water fowl; and is not peculiar to this place alone, but it occurred on all the creeks and rivers we crossed through they were most numerous in the morning and evening, when they were most easily shot.(2)

So plentiful were the birds that nearly any method of hunting them proved successful. Wild pigeons were snared in nets by the thousands, salted down and used to feed slaves.[3] The Indians shot more than they needed with bows and arrows, and easily caught small reed birds by scattering wild oats over the surface of the water, then hitting the birds on the head with paddles as they lighted on the oats.[4] The Indians also developed an ingenious method of capturing wild turkeys: they laid a trail of corn into a pit trap enclosed by logs, "and these foolish birds," wrote one observer of the Virginia scene, "instead of returning the way they came in, keep continuously flying up, by which means one or two out of the flock in the morning are found dead...."[5] John Lawson, hunting in North Carolina in the year 1701, "kill'd of wild fowl 4 swans, 10 geese, 29 cranes, 10 Turkies, 40 Ducks and Mallards, 3 dozen of Parakeetos, and 6 dozen of other small fowl," all in one day. He did not think it a particularly impressive catch.[6]

Large bags such as this appear to have made few inroads in the supply of waterfowl during the entire colonial period. Those writing descriptions in 1775 speak as enthusiastically of the "incredible numbers of ducks, geese, and turkies," as the earliest colonists did.[7] Only toward the very end of the eighteenth

century did it become apparent that irresponsible hunters and widespread settlement were rapidly depleting this resource. There was "very little of what is termed game to be found in any part of America I visited," Richard Parkinson wrote sadly in 1799.[8] Thomas Jefferson proposed going to extravagant lengths to lure wild birds and animals to the vicinity of Monticello. In his Garden Book he noted the following plan for repopulating the forest:

> thin the trees, cut out stumps and undergrowth. remove old trees and other rubbish, except where they may look well. cover the whole with grass...keep it in deer, rabbits, Peacocks, Guinea poultry, pigeons, etc. let it be an asylum for hares, squirrels, pheasants, partridges, and every other wild animal (except those of prey.) court them to it by laying food for them in proper plates....(9)

In their abundance, wild birds became a natural source of food for those trying to get established, or too poor to raise their own poultry. "The meaner sort..," stated an itinerant traveler, subsisted on "mush and milk, or molasses, homine, wild fowl, and fish...."[10] Another noted that wild fowl constituted a major portion of the diet of slaves, a fact which contributed to the cheapness of that labor source.[11] "I suspect you will give me some account of what

sort...of execution you have made amongst the Ducks Quails Turkies etc.," wrote John Cook to his brother, who had recently emigrated to Maryland. Like many others, Cook was attempting to tide himself over the period of clearing and planting his land by living off native plants and animals as much as possible.[12] If wild fowl graced the humblest tables, however, it also remained a much admired delicacy in the dining rooms of notables. Governor Spotswood of Virginia was so fond of wild goose that men of stature sent them to him as a tribute.[13] The son of Robert Carter of Nomini Hall, went "daily fowling" in the marshes near his home; his catch often appeared as the evening meal.[14] Wild goose, duck, partridge, and pigeon appeared regularly on the table of William Byrd.[15]

The colonists supplemented this wild fowl with domesticated poultry, brought from Europe by the earliest settlers. Chickens arrived at Jamestown with the colonists in 1607; in 1609 there were five hundred tame fowl in the settlements.[16] Two years later a supply ship brought additional birds. Added to these imports were by tame turkeys and geese which the Indians raised, and either traded or gave to the colonists. By 1614 John Smith could boast that the colony had "Poultry great store beside tame Turkies, Peacocks, and Pigeons."[17] In order to preserve the

food supply the initial settlers were forbidden to kill chickens or geese without the permission of the governor.[18] A quarter of a century later, however, a visitor to Jamestown found that poultry was a common item on most tables. "This country aboundeth with very great plentie," wrote Thomas Yong, "insomuch as in ordinary as in ordinary planters' houses of the better sort we found tables furnished with pork, kidd, chicken, turkeyes, young geese, Caponets, and other such foules as the season of the yeare affords...."[19] Indeed, by this date, poultry were so numerous in Virginia that Virginians were able to sell birds to those who had come to colonize Maryland in the early 1630s.[20] In a very short time, this colony, too, was well supplied with birds. In 1635 a promoter bragged that "the hogges and Poultry are already increased in Maryland to a greate stocke, sufficient to serve the Colonie very plentifully." Rather than trouble to import more chickens and ducks, he advised prospective immigrants to bring woolen cloth to trade for fowls already established in the New World.[21]

By all accounts the number of fowls kept by those living in Maryland and Virginia was large. During the time which the Virginia Company was chiefly responsible for colonizing the area, it was said that poultry were so numerous that only a extraordinarily bad husbandman

failed to breed one hundred per year.[22] A visitor to Maryland in 1745, describing the farms of modest planters, included this phrase: "their Yards and Closes boast Hundreds of Tame Poultry of every Kind...."[23] It was said that the warm climate favored the raising of poultry, that they "propagated better" in an environment which was unspoiled and underpopulated.[24] John Lawson noted that the planters' life was easy because "fatted Porketts and Poultry are easily rais'd to his Table...."[24] Travelers uniformly exclaimed over the large flocks: "They have poultry in prodigious plenty and variety," was a typical comment.[26] One visitor was served chicken and bacon so often during his travels in Maryland that he sarcastically noted: "Have had either Bacon or Chicken every meal since I came in to the country. If I still continue in this way shall be grown over with Bristles or Feathers."[27]

If is difficult to determine, however, the exact number of poultry raised by the average farmer in the Chesapeake area. The poultry inventory made by Landon Carter in 1764 upholds the descriptions of large flocks. In addition to over two hundred chickens, his holdings included one hundred geese, twenty turkeys, and thirty ducks.[28] Carter's inventory, however, was rare. Most planters evidently considered poultry,

especially chickens, of too little value to enumerate in yearly inventories or estate accounts. Thomas Jefferson was typical--he annually recorded the number of steers, cows, hogs, horses, oxen and mules at Monticello, but declined to mention his poultry holdings, though it is known that he raised chickens, ducks, Guinea fowl, geese, and turkeys.[29] Estate inventories for Prince George's County, Maryland, also fail to accurately reflect the poultry holdings of colonial farmers. For the period 1696 to 1760 not a single account enumerated chickens, and only a handful listed holdings of ducks, geese or turkeys. In a sense this is curious, for poultry did have a value - albeit small. Chickens, for example, fluctuated between a market price of nine pence and two shillings during the colonial period. Evidently, poultry was too inconsequential and time consuming for the farmer or executor to accurately count. What is left is a picture of poultry being exceedingly abundant, so much so that its value was underestimated, and its presence taken for granted.[30]

Yet poultry was also considered an essential part of any estate. The assertions of travelers are underscored by the fact that every site - townhouses, slave cabins, planatation houses, and tenant farms - excavated by archeologists in colonial Williamsburg

since 1935 has yielded chicken bones.[31] Agricultural manuals such as American Husbandry, which appeared in 1775, advised those starting a farm to include a few chickens, no matter how limited their funds. A farm of two hundred acres could be stocked for under £15, including 10 shillings for poultry, wrote one author. Another advised planning for a farm of a thousand acres by setting aside £2 for chickens, ducks, and geese. At average rates of 1 shilling per chicken and 4 shillings per goose, duck, or turkey, a farmer could expect to buy a pair each of the larger birds, and a dozen and a half chickens.[32]

If farmers were lax about counting their chickens, they were equally unconcerned with care, and particularly, breeding. For the most part, poultry were left to shift for themselves, with occasional corn offered to them to keep them from becoming too wild. Breeding was spontaneous and (until the development of specific varieties used for cock-fighting) generally ignored by the farmer. Chickens were referred to as "dunghill" or "barndoor" fowl, and identified only by color or laying propensity. Eight prevalent types of barndoor fowl were identified in the early nineteenth century, all, as one author wrote, "determined by color which does not remain true, due to interbreeding." These included:

1. fowl with a small comb
2. crowned fowl
3. silver-colored fowl
4. slate-colored fowl
5. chamois-colored fowl
6. ermine-like fowl
7. widow; with tear-like spots on a dark ground
8. fire and stone-colored fowl.(33)

Dunghill fowls were even less distinguished. "The Dunghill fowl," wrote one agriculturalist, in rather lofty tones, "occupies in the poultry yards precisely the position of the cur dog in the kennel, being, in fact, the produce of a miscellaneous intermixture of most of the ordinary domestic varieties, and constantly differing in its appearance with the accident which may have influenced its parentage."[34]

By the mid-eighteenth century, farmers in England and America recognized the advantages of distinct breeds: the Spangled Hamburg, noted for its beauty rather than tender flesh or abundant laying; the Poland or Polish top knot, remarkable for its prodigious laying and attractive black and white feathers; the Dorking, an all-purpose fowl of early maturity, and excellent flesh, which produced large eggs.[35] Richard Parkinson, who farmed near Baltimore toward the end of the eighteenth century, described a large chicken, originating in the East Indies which was considered to have exceptionally well-flavored meat, and a smaller variety which produced the best eggs, yet he offered

neither name nor description of the birds.[36] But no records have been found that indicate selective breeding of chickens occurred, even on farms run by dedicated agriculturalists. George Washington, John Beale Bordley, and Thomas Jefferson all appear to have been content with their flocks of dung-hill fowl. Even Landon Carter, a compulsive improver of everything on his Virginia plantation, identified only one distinct variety of chicken: the "Bantham" or Bantam cock, used for fighting.[37]

Turkeys posed fewer problems of identification. They all sprang originally from the wild North American birds. Through interbreeding they had changed somewhat in size and shape, and had developed different coloration, but essentially the wild and tame birds were indistinguishable in habits or taste. Domesticated birds were sometimes white, copper, brown, or gray, but all retained the smoky-colored head and rich plumage.[38] One eighteenth century observer noticed that farmyard birds were smaller than their wild counterparts "but so like them, that I should be unable to distinguish the one from the other." The birds themselves seem scarcely to have been able to tell the difference, for wild turkeys were regularly attracted to farmyards by the presence of the domesticated birds. Indeed, it was thought that the most desirable birds

resulted from a cross between the wild and domesticated birds. "The great secret," wrote St. Jean de Crevecoeur, "consists in procuring the eggs of the wild sort and then [crossing] the breed. In that case we are always sure of a hardier and heavier bird."[39]

Geese, too, were not typed by varieties but by physical characteristics such as large or small, white or gray. These four groupings were the major categories of geese in the colonial period. The distinctions were arbitrary, of course, as was the preference for either white or gray birds. One author noted that a type called the "gray lag" - a uniformly light gray fowl - was the favorite goose of the late 1700s.[40] Like turkeys, some geese evidently interbred with the wild varieties. A visitor to Virginia saw "a flock of geese of a breed, wild and domesticated mixed." Their necks were black and very slender, and it was said that their meat was superior to that of either the tame or wild strains. "Citizens introduce this species either by slightly wounding the wild birds in flight," he wrote, "or by gathering their eggs and setting them under the domestic geese." The result was "infinite improvement" over the established varieties. Peter Kalm also noted this practice in Pennsylvania when the wings were kept clipped to keep the wild geese from straying.[41]

Descriptions of colonial ducks are as vague as those of chickens and geese. They seem to have been raised less frequently than the other varieties of poultry, perhaps because of the great abundance of wild ducks around the Chesapeake Bay. One expert observed that the tame ducks were similar to English breeds - Normandy, Crook-bill, and Muscovy - but that they seemed to do poorly in the American climate. "In hot weather they appear troubled," commented Richard Parkinson, "and though continuously in the water seem not revived by it."[42] Only the wild varieties were identified by distinct names - Canvas-Back and Muscovy being the most highly regarded. Otherwise they were distinguished in the same manner as geese: by color, size, or habitat.

In addition to these four common types of poultry, colonial farmers raised a few exotic birds. "These are great numbers of Guinea birds and they thrive well," one man wrote from Maryland. These African birds, possibly brought to America by slaves, had no American counterpart, and thus remained a distinct species, despite the farmer's tendency to keep them in a semi-wild state.[43] Peacocks were also imported, less for their fine-flavored flesh, than for their decorative appeal. Like Guinea fowl they had no wild counterpart with which to interbreed in America, and they retained

their original form and genetic make-up. Just how prevalent these colorful birds were is difficult to be ascertain. English manuals of husbandry extolled their virtues as meat, and for eliminating troublesome insects, and a few travelers noted their presence on the tables of wealthier planters.[44] But none are listed in the estate accounts for Prince George's County, and directions for their care are omitted from every agricultural manual written in America before 1800.[45]

Partridges, pheasants, and other game birds were also sometimes domesticated by continuously feeding them and providing secluded nesting places near the barnyard. Though they bred with wild birds of their own varieties, they did not intermix with other barnyard fowl, and thus remained distinct types. Imported pigeons, on the other hand, interbred freely. A Maryland man remarked that some planters had imported pigeons from France. English pigeons and doves were also brought to America. William Byrd was one who raised them at Westover, his estate on the James River. These imported varieties, though kept in houses and tamed by constant feeding, freely interbred with native American species such as the passenger pigeon. The result was a pigeon larger than the European species of various colors, ranging from white to slate-gray. They were tame enough to keep from flying into the woods or

joining wild flocks in migration. Like other types of poultry, they were not identified by distinct names, and no attempt at selective breeding was made.[46]

By the time America was colonized poultry had long been recognized, not only as a necessary food crop, but an important source of supplemental income for the farm family. Poultry was considered an exceptionally good value for Americans who desired to set up a farm because the animals could be easily transported, increased their numbers rapidly, and provided highly nutritious food. In addition, there was a steady market for feathers, eggs, and pullets. Precise methods for the care and breeding of ducks, geese, and chickens were included in such early farming manuals as Thomas Tusser's _Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandry_, or Gervase Markham's _A Way to Get Wealth_. Though no book soley on poultry husbandry was available in English until 1750, many agriculturalists devoted sections of more general works to the subject.[47]

* * * *

Tending poultry was traditionally woman's work. British domestic handbooks recommended this practice, which gave the woman the advantage of any profits gained from the sale of feathers or eggs. It was also

easier for a housewife to care for the fowls, since they could remain under her watchful eye while the men were in the field. The practice was transferred to America. On larger estates, such as Landon Carter's Sabine Hall, female slaves were delegated to feed, water, and watch over the chickens and geese, but even here the mistress of the plantation was expected to oversee the work. Once, on observing the sloppy management of his poultry yard, Carter railed against the women of his family, whom, he stated, had "grown too delicate to look into such family affairs."[48] Even notable woman like the wife of Robert Carter, and Thomas Jefferson's daughter, Maria, took a hand in raising the family poultry.[49]

Women who would undertake the raising of chickens were cautioned to watch three things: the correct selection of fowls; that they had sufficent space to nest; and that they were well-fed and watered. Flocks were to be started from well-colored animals, with long necks, high bodies, and bright eyes. Generally, one cock was sufficient for from seven to ten hens. Neophyte poulterers were warned against bringing in too many birds before family needs were well understood for "If we have to many they <u>starve</u> one another; and if we have too few we are losers." Poultry keepers were also advised to keep the number of hens to cocks in

proportion by selling hens rather than buying cocks, for strange birds often upset the flock, or caused fights with the other roosters.[50]

If the flock was started from chicks, they were to be kept warm by wrapping in wool, and fed on oatmeal, or cornmeal soaked in milk, until they were several weeks old. During this time they were to be kept in a protected place as a caution against blacksnakes, weasels, and other predators. Occasional clippings of chives, or spear grasses, were considered necessary for their development, as were pans of fresh water. As they grew older they were allowed to roam freely through the barnyard, feeding themselves on insects, gleanings of grain, and tufts of grass. Their scavenging was supplemented by buckwheat, corn, or barley, scattered partly to insure an adequate diet, and partly to keep the chickens from becoming too wild by providing food near the house each morning.[51]

Agriculturalists were divided in their opinions of the proper housing for chickens. Gervase Markham, a writer of the late seventeenth century, thought fowls did not thrive when cooped up, and advised farmers to let them roam freely. If they were to be housed, it should be in a large high building with a pitched roof, and in ground pens which were fenced at least three feet high. Ideally, the house would be located near the kitchen, where there was a great deal of smoke; a

necessity, Markham believed for successful poultry culture.[52] John Beale Bordley, thought the size and shape of the house of less importance than its cleanliness; it should be "kept sweet by being frequently cleaned out; and fresh sand and gravel are strewn in the yard...."[53] The renowned English agriculturalist Arthur Young believed a henhouse was "indispensable" on the farm, and like Markham, a century earlier, advised filling it with sturdy, even, perches, which the hens could easily reach.[54] Planters such as Carter, Washington, William Fitzhugh, or Bordley, followed this advice and provided their fowls with clean shelter and warm nesting places.[55] There is evidence, however, that in the Southern colonies, hen-houses and coops were not widely constructed. "In this region chickens are not confined to coops or especially looked after during the night," wrote a visitor to southern Pennsylvania. "But they sit summer and winter on trees near the houses. And every evening many trees are so weighed down with chickens that the boughs bend underneath them."[56] Despite warnings that the farmers who "carelessly permits his fowls to roost in the adjacent trees will receive very little good from them," chickens were generally left on their own to poke at the offal around the barnyard, and perch wherever they could; hence the name "dung hill"

fowls.[57] In a sample of estate advertisements in the _Maryland_ _Gazette_ for the years 1730-1750, only one listed a henhouse as a major attribute of the plantation.[58] And Ebenezer Cook, who memorialized an early eighteenth century sojourn through Maryland in rhyme, gives evidence that the housing available to fowls who were the property of humbler farmers, was that which they could share with humans, pigs, or other livestock. In one farmer's house, after a tiring day, Cook dropped off to sleep in a chimney corner.

> But soon a noise disturb'd my quiet,
> And plaguged me with nocturnal Riot,
> A Puss which in the ashes lay,
> With grunting Pig began a Fray.
> And prudent Dog, that feuds might cease,
> Most strongly bark'd to keep the Peace,
> The quarrel scarecely was decided,
> By stick that ready lay provided;
> But _Reynard_ arch and cunning Loon,
> Broke into my appartment soon;
> In hot pursuit of Ducks and Geese,
> With full intent the same to seize:
> Their Cackling Plaints with strange surprize,
> Chac'd sleeps thich Vapours from my Eyes:
> Raging I jumped upon the floor,
> And like a Drunken Saylor swore.
> With sword I fiercely laid about
> And soon dispers'd the feather'd Rout.
> The Poultry out the Window flew,
> And _Reynard_ cautiously withdrew.(59)

Thus poultry, like most other animals of the colonial period, were generally left to fend for themselves, with protection afforded only as they could find it in trees and other outbuildings. Model poultry keepers provided straw - not hay - for their nesting fowls, saw that extra corn and water were given to them, and

watched carefully to make sure that the hens did not have too many eggs to watch over. When not breeding, eggs were to be gathered once a day. Buckwheat was thought to increase the egg yield, and regular feeding kept the hens from straying. The best breeding chickens were thought to be those over a year old, but still young and energetic. Often their eggs were given to older hens for setting, for these fowl were thought to be more stable. Some authors mentioned artificially hatching the eggs by placing them in warm ovens, or burying them in a hot bed filled with horse dung. The latter method, said to work extremely well, involved placing the eggs in a clay pot filled with soft wool, covering them with more wool, and burying the pot up to the rim in the hot bed.[60]

The greatest care taken by colonial farmers was in fattening their fowl. Landon Carter mentioned a special "fattening coop" in his diary in 1773, and a number of other farmers penned the animals for the last few weeks of their existence.[61] English authors listed numerous ways of fattening poultry, among which the use of barley was a favorite. In America, where this grain was less common, corn was favored over either oats or barley. John Lawson noted that buckwheat, maize, and Guinea corn were used to fatten both hogs and poultry in North Carolina, and that maize was the most preferred of the grains: "Pigs and Poultry fed with

this Grain, eat the sweetest of all other."[62] Sometimes, the authors recommended boiling either bread or meal with milk, then cooling it to give to fowls. Each expert had his preferred method of feeding. Some thought rolling the meal into pellets and force feeding was the best approach; others recommended pans of the gruel mixed with gravel or sand, a necessary aid to the digestion of the poultry. One writer advocated feeding the condemned birds ale or beer to give them a fat, tasty flesh. Richard Bradley thought a mixture of brick dust and barley meal was the ideal feed. Most likely American farmers used whatever grain they had in surplus -- in general this would have been corn.[63]

Some male chickens were raised for capons. Their care was similar to other chicks until just before they reached sexual maturity. When their testicles began to enlarge, and the comb was well-developed, they were ready to be neutered. One agriculturalist maintained that the ideal time for the operation was early autumn. The cock's head was sometimes put into a bag to prevent pecking or struggling, but the housewife who performed the operation risked injury from the sharp talons on the rooster's feet. William Ellis, writing in 1750, described the operation this way:

> To cut them the Cock must be on its back, & held fast, while with a very sharpe knife she cuts him only skin deep about an Inch in length, between the Rump & the end of the Breast-bone, where the flesh is thinnest; next she makes use of a

> large needle to raise the flesh, for her safer cutting through it to avoid the Guts, & making a cut here big enough to put her finger in which she thrusts under the Guts, & with it rakes or tears out the stone that lies nearest to it. This done she performs the very same operation on the other side of the Cock's Body, & there takes out the other Stone; then she stitches up the Wounds & lets the Fowl go about as at other Times....(64)

Raising geese caused the farmer little more trouble than did raising chickens. Experienced farmers warned that there would be little profit if abundant water - a pond or stream, for example - was not nearby, and that common grass was needed for them to graze upon. Otherwise they required very virtually no care. "The keeping of the Goose requires very little Labour Charge, neither in the breeding of the Goslins, or the common fattening them for the Markets," wrote Richard Bradley from England.[65] In America the geese were allowed to wander at will, even in the towns, where whole bands of them often ran wild through the streets. The animals lived on insects or worms, the green shoots of grass and herbs, and gleanings from the field. Only in winter weather were they kept in the barnyard, lured there with barley or corn meal. So difficult was it to keep geese near the farmyard, that farmers devised a kind of yoke which prevented them from creeping through fences. Thomas Anburey described it in 1774 as "four

little sticks, about a foot in length, which are fastened crossways about their necks. You cannot imagine how extremely awkward they appear...."[66]

Such wandering occasionally led to disputes between neighbors over the ownership of geese. In eighteenth century Maryland and Virginia most farmers had registered identifying marks for their cattle and hogs, which also roamed freely. No such markings for geese or other poultry were found in the colonial court records of either Prince George's County, Maryland or Fairfax County, Virginia. An incident which occurred at Sabine Hall in 1772 illustrates the difficulty farmers had in precisely identifying geese which wandered onto other people's property. When Carter's geese "strolled promiscuously" into the road, a neighboring farmer tried to claim some of them. "My son said then he must have marked them," Carter wrote, "he said no but he knew them by their flesh marks. To be sure such an oath taken would be making fun with oaths to swear by the feathers and the color of the feathers especially of geese that had often been plucked in the summer." Carter tried to show his ownership of the birds by seeing if they would run into his poultry yard as if it were home. His adversary maintained that this proved nothing, and held firm on his claim, even when Carter threatened to prosecute.

In the end a compromise was reached, the man left with four of the geese, and Carter returned to his study to complain to his journal.[67]

Those who wished to take more care could closely supervise the growth of their geese. The birds nested in February and farmers were advised to keep them secluded and well supplied with food. The young hatched in about thirty days. Ideally, they were kept indoors, and warm for a week, then left to nibble young lettuce or "goose grass" on their own. Bread crusts soaked in milk was also considered suitable food for goslings, and one author recommended feeding them boiled turnips, or raw carrots.[68] Bit by bit they could be let out of the farmyard until ready to run on their own.

A favorite delicacy in England and America was "green goose," a succulent roast of young goose, just at the edge of maturity. It was a spring dish, for the ideal age for a green goose was only two or three months. A gosling thus bound for the table was penned for about a month, and fed green oats boiled with milk or water. This was a good method of culling out excess goslings, as well as a much admired feast. The ideal ratio was one gander to five geese: too many ganders would cause fighting among the flock, and too few would not produce the desired number of eggs.[69]

Mature geese were fatted and killed after frost. Many elaborate methods for fattening them were proposed, some borrowed from the Languidoc region of France, which was noted for its delicious geese. The French believed that isolating the goose from the daylight and the sounds of other geese made them eat more, so the creatures were hung up in the dark, with peas in the ears to stop their hearing, and force fed a paste made of malt or barley meal. Sometimes bags were kept over their heads, with an opening for the beak and they were stuffed with dried figs.[70] John Beale Bordley devised a system of fattening which was based on mush or potatoes, boiled grain, and water; he also adhered to the belief that a fattening goose should be kept from light and sound.[71] The cheapest and least time-consuming way of fattening geese, however, was to simply turn the animal onto the stubble fields to eat the grain dropped by the harvesters. Called the "English" method, this had the advantage of clearing the field as it fattened the geese. It was widely used throughout the Chesapeake Bay area. Landon Carter, for example, put his geese on both corn and barley fields each August, though occasionally he was dismayed to find they could cause considerable damage to the corn stalks which were needed for fodder.[72]

Since geese were raised largely for their feathers, great care was taken not to cover them with blood or otherwise harm the down when a goose was killed. Chickens were killed by either beheading or wringing the neck, but it was recommended that geese be dispatched by severing the spinal cord. "A Goose is to be kill'd," advised Bradley, "by pulling first the feathers at the back of the Head, and cutting pretty deep with a sharp penknife, between the back of the Head and the Neck, taking care that it does not struggle, so as to make the feathers bloody, for that will spoil them...."[73]

Like geese, ducks required a nearby pond or stream, an abundance of grass, and little care. They could be induced to lay their eggs in early spring near the farmstead, by feeding them several times a day near the desired nesting place. They naturally ate snails, slugs, young frogs, caterpillars, green grass, and insects; the housewife was advised to supplement this, only if necessary, with a mash of grain and water. In England ducks were turned into turnip or rape fields where they subsisted nicely on a variety of black caterpillar, but there is little to indicate that they were let into the fields in America. A good ratio for breeding ducks was one drake to twenty ducks. This would produce at least forty young each spring. The young needed attention only if born early, or in severe

weather, and could be fattened for the table in as few as four months. Fattening took three weeks, and was done in a pen by force feeding a mash of any kind of grain and water.[74]

Turkeys required a good deal more care than other varieties of poultry. Though tame enough to feed near the farm and interbreed with the more domesticated birds, most turkeys remained semi-wild. They roosted away from the barnyard, and were apt to try to follow wild turkeys to the woods each fall. "Here they hate confinement;" admitted Crevecoeur, "in the most severe of our Freezing nights they will reach the utmost limbs of our highest trees and there boldly face the northwest winds."[75] The birds were susceptible to nettles, injury by hogs, and frequently died from exposure to damp. During the first weeks of life they needed careful watching. Wrote Bradley, "they are indeed somewhat troublesome for the first month."[76] Turkeys nested in March. There were up to thirty eggs in a clutch; hen and cock both took turns sitting on them. The eggs hatched after about four weeks. At this age the chicks were extremely prone to death by exposure, and were particularly ill-effected by the spring rains. Ideally chicks were kept indoors, in a dry spot, and fed chopped hard-boiled eggs, curds, oatmeal and milk, and some green grass or herbs. Some-

times they were put under the care of a hen in a coop. The early confinement also protected them from hawks, polecats, and other predators. After one or two months they were given small grains, but generally left to shift for themselves. The more careful farmers kept them on a turf of grass, under a coop, for a few more months. After this they were left to freely roam the farm, looking for grasshoppers, caterpillars, acorns, and herbs. They were kept near the farm by regular feeding of barley or corn meal. Fattening took place in the fall, generally on birds at least two years old. For three weeks or more the turkeys were kept in a pen, and fed moistened barley or oats. Farmers took great pride in the size of their birds, bragging on turkeys which weighed over fifty pounds. Younger birds were considered superior eating, and the older birds in the flock were generally kept as decoys for wild turkeys.[77]

Most pigeons kept in the Chesapeake area were also semi-wild. They required housing, and Bordley (among others) recommended this as a necessary part of the farm.[78] No description of such a structure has survived, save the casual remark by William Byrd that he believed his pigeon house should be raised above the ground, presumably to allow for better air circulation and to protect against snakes.[79] Besides a place to live, pigeons needed fresh water. Bradley suggested

watering them from a bottle turned upside down, with a dripper in its neck. In general they needed no other care, for they could feed themselves from the fields and barnyard. Encouragement to keep close to the farm, or to nest in the cote, could be made in the form of regular feedings of green peas, tares, or buckwheat, mixed with gravel. In March, one author maintained, they were a boon to the newly sown fields, for they would eat only the grain left above the ground which would not grow anyway. This kept the field undisturbed, and the scattered seed from being wasted.[79] The domesticated birds would not fly off, but attracted wild pigeons to the farm, which could easily be snared.[80]

Peacocks were another fowl that required little care. A number of authors proclaimed their virtues as a table meat: "this fowl may as well by admir'd for its excellence at the Table, as for the beautiful appearance it makes in the Fields," Bradley declared.[81] In America, however, peacocks were grown more to delight the eye, than the purse or palate. The cock was considered "tough, hard, stringy, and untasted, and even undelicious," though the hen was thought to be quite good eating.[82] The pea hen laid her eggs in April, generally hiding them from both the cock and humans. Peacocks had a tendency to destroy the nest

and farmers were careful to find the eggs and set them under a chicken to hatch, turning the eggs frequently. When they were hatched, the weaker chicks were brought to the house for a day or two, then put in the barnyard until they could protect and scratch for themselves. Like turkeys, young peacocks were greatly harmed by the rain, and it was thought best to have a coop or other shelter available to them. They thrived on chopped leeks and moistened grain, or bread boiled in milk. After about a month they were ready to roam in the fields with the hen. During cold winter weather, farmers were advised to house the birds, either with the chickens, or in another barnyard shelter.[83]

"Partiridges" observed a visitor to the upper South in the mid-1700s, "which are here in abundance, may likewise be so tamed as to run about all day with the poultry, and to come along with them to be fed when they are called." Thus other wild fowl, chiefly pheasants, and partridges, joined the poultry yard.[84] They served to attract wild birds for hunting or furnish a stable supply of their delicate meat. Like turkeys, they had a tendency to try and rejoin wild flocks. Because of this, their wings were frequently pinioned, either by pulling out the flight feathers, or by removing the feathers from the first joint of the wing, cutting it off, and staunching the flow of blood

with a tourniquet made of string.[85] With this restriction the birds were allowed to nest and wander on their own, tied to the farmyard by a regular panful of corn. Peas and small insects, such as ants, were the standard food of these fowl; breeding birds were thought to lay better if fed a paste of barley meal, eggs, and water. Some English authors suggested cooping the younger birds, but there is no evidence that this was practiced in America.[86]

Poultry, especially those running loose, were particularly susceptible to disease, and were the prey of a number of animals, both wild and domestic. Peter Kalm noted that birds of prey - hawks, eagles, owls - were especially abundant where there were thriving poultry yards, and warned farmers not to let their fowl run near the marshes that were the predators' natural habitat.[87] Foxes, notorious poultry thieves, were decried by Ebenezer Cook, and Landon Carter, among others.[88] Carter also had trouble with minks, which stole into his henhouse no matter how carefully he guarded it. In North Carolina, John Lawson also cited the mink as an enemy of the poultry-keeper. "The Minx may be made domestick," he wrote, "and were it not for his paying a Visit now and then to the Poultry, they are the greatest destroyers of Rats and Mice...."[89] In addition, poultry was vulnerable to the hooves of sheep

and cattle, as Landon Carter discovered in 1773. "I find that where there is the least carelessness everything will kill even chickens." he complained. "I had 27 at my fork quarter, and because my fattening coop was not done quite soon enough, the sheep killed all be twelve; it seems they got into their pen and the sheep trampled them to death."[90] Pigs were also notorious for killing chickens and turkeys that flew into their way.[91]

Poultry diseases, though not scientifically diagnosed, were of distinct types in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The "Croup" - or contraction of the stomach - was common among newly hatched birds. Cures included forcing a peppercorn down the throat of the chick, or adding fennel seed to its water.[92] The "pip" - a small scale on the tip of a fowl's tongue or beak which made eating difficult - was thought to arise from contaminated food or water. It was to be removed, and the tongue bathed in vinegar.[93] The "roup" was another common complaint of chickens. This was a small inflammation on the rump of the bird. The farmer was instructed to look for the swelling, lance the spot, then bathe it in salt water or boiling vinegar.[94] It was believed that snails and slugs were the cause of the "droop," for which there was no cure but the frying pan. The "flux" and constipation were other common

problems: they were thought to be the result of, respectively, too moist food or too dry food. The remedy was the obvious: decrease or increase the moisture content of the poultry's feed. If this failed, the farmer had to take other measures. For the flux, the poultry were to be given scalded bran, wrung dry, mixed with the powder of the dry roots of tormentil. If excessively moist food did not relieve constipation, then bread dipped in human urine, or in broth, was the cure.[95]

Vermin were another liability of poultry. Nearly all free-ranging animals had lice, although those which preened themselves regularly kept them to a minimum. Gervase Markham thought heavily infested birds should be washed in a bath of salt and pepper mixed with hot water. Thomas Hale reminded the poultry-keeper to provide his birds with plenty of water and dry ground. If vermin still appeared he recommended the following remedy:

> Boil a quarter of a pound of white hellebore root sliced in two quarts of water...strain this off, put it into a quart bottle, and put to it an ounce of beaten pepper, and half an ounce of scotch snuff. Wash the skin where the vermin are with this and it will prove a certain and speedy cure.(96)

Sores and swellings were to be treated immediately with a bath of warm milk and ointment made of equal parts of resin, butter and tar. Sore eyes were another frequent complaint. They were to be relieved by a mash made of celandine, ground ivy, and clown's woundwort, steeped in white wine. Morning and evening the fowl's eyes were to be brushed with the mixture until the soreness healed.[97]

* * * *

The main use of poultry was, of course, as a foodstuff. The settlers from Europe brought with them a well-established liking for roasted, broiled, and fricasseed fowl and a wide assortment of egg dishes. Every national culinary tradition featured some kind of poultry. The great plenty of wild fowl was continually cited as proof of the natural abundance of the New World. The early colonists were quick to take advantage of the wild birds, and to add to their numbers by importing domestic birds. Throughout the colonial period poultry held the rare position of a food that was at once inexpensive, and sumptuous. Well within the means of all classes, chicken, turkey, duck, and goose were served at the tables of backwoods tenants as well as wealthy planters and royal officials.

Some indication of the frequency with which poultry was served, and the variety of ways in which it appeared, can be gleaned from the entries in the diary of William Byrd. Byrd scrupulously recorded what he ate for dinner each day. In February 1712, for example, poultry was served at "Westover" the following ways.

1st - goose giblets
2nd - cold chicken
3rd - roast turkey
4th - partridge
6th - pigeon and bacon
7th - partridge
9th - turkey
10th - roast pigeon
11th - roast turkey
12th - bacon and eggs
13th - roast fowl
18th - fricassee of chicken
19th - broiled turkey
21st - battered eggs
26th - roast capon (98)

In addition, during the first six months of 1712, Byrd ate boiled turkey, wild goose, chicken pie, fried chicken and bacon, poached eggs, pigeon pudding, and any number of broiled, roasted, or boiled ducks.[99]

From Delaware, Israel Acrelius reported that fowls were served with cabbage "set round about," and that another common meal was roast turkey, goose or duck served with potatoes and beans. The poorer people ate pasties made of chicken, which could be carried to the fields, and eaten hot or cold.[100] A traveler in Virginia near the end of the colonial period was

impressed by a planter's banquet which featured poultry. "Here I found a large table loaded with fat roasted turkies, geese, and ducks, boiled fowls, large hams, hung-beef, barbicued pig, etc., enough for five-and-twenty men."[101] In southern Maryland chicken was jocularly known as "Toss'em boys" because "when any unexpected guest is seen coming a young negro is dispatched to procure more chickens to be added to the dinner, and these chickens it is common to run down with his dog whom he sets on, and encourages by the phrase, 'Toss'em boys!'"[102]

Whether caught by dogs or humans poultry destined for the pot was killed quickly, then dipped in scalding water to help release the feathers.[103] Following this, any number of methods could be used to cook the meat. Amelia Simmons, the earliest American cookbook author, included recipes for stuffed turkey, chicken pies, and fowl smothered in oysters (see Appendix).[104] English authors could recommend wild duck dressed with sage and thyme; eggs, hard-boiled and served in a cream sauce; and pheasants in claret sauce, or roasted with bacon. One culinary expert offered thirty-three ways to prepare chicken.[105] In the well-ordered world of author Hannah Glasse, roast goose was always served with apple sauce; turkey and duck with onion sauce; pigeon with parsley, and pheasants with bread sauce.

She also instructed her reader to try cold fowl hash, giblet pie, and roast capon with chestnuts.[106] Recipes for cakes, pies, and puddings also included eggs, an important by-product of raising poultry.

The products of the poultry yard also had a medicinal value. Landon Carter was among those who discovered the nourishing and comforting properties of chicken soup. Carter took chicken broth for constipation, indigestion, and administered it to a slave suffering from "fever and ague."[107] Eggs were valued for their nourishment and binding properties, and were frequent ingredients in colonial medicines, as the following two recipes from the Virginia Almanack attest:

> for burns:
>
> Take of the Ointment called Nutriturn one Ounce, the entire Yolk of one small Egg, or the half of a large one, and mix them well together.
>
> A Cure for Yellow Jaundice:
>
> Take the White of an Egg and two Glasses of Spring Water, beat them well together and drink the Quantity off at a Draught.(108)

Eggs and meat were the most important poultry products, but feathers were also significant reason for keeping geese. Feather beds, arrows, and quill pens were the chief uses for down and feathers. Nearly

every family had a feather bed; of the 312 inventories recorded in Prince George's County between 1729-1740, only four neglected to list a feather bolster or bed.[109] In one year, Thomas Jefferson had to purchase five hundred extra pounds of feathers to make beds at Monticello.[110] Although any poultry feathers could be used, goose feathers, because of their exceptional warmth and softness, were most highly valued. "...you will take call to receive none but goose feathers, unmixed and well-dried," Jefferson cautioned his overseer.[111] Feathers were saved from dead animals, of course, but to increase the number available for home and commercial use, it was common to pluck the live animals once or twice a year. This was a cruel business, which shocked a number of visitors to the Chesapeake area. "Geese, plucked alive," wrote one man, "drag themselves about pitiful and naked. The owners pluck their down two or three times a year. This terrible practice is the result of need, or rather greed."[112]

Plucking geese was a woman's job. A stocking was placed over the head of the bird to keep it from biting, or occasionally its head was thrust into a narrow-necked basket. The bird squealed and struggled while down flew everywhere.[113] English and American agriculturalists advised against such live plucking,

since it robbed the goose of strength and the feathers' protective cover, causing sickness in the winter, as well as vulnerability to foxes and other predators. Advised William Ellis: "therefore it is best to stay till moulting time, or till you kill her, and then you may imploy all her feathers as your pleasure...."[114] As the price of feathers rose to two shillings a pound, however, few housewives were anxious to give up the lucrative practice of live plucking. Indeed, by the end of the colonial period geese were more often kept for their feathers than for their flesh.[115]

Manure was another benefit of the poultry yard. Although the gospel of guano would not reach the Chesapeake Bay for half a century, by the late 1700s, a number of farmers were experimenting with chicken dung on their fields. Those following the advice of Thomas Tusser, collected dung from the poultry yard and dove cote, and put it on the kitchen garden to increase the growth of vegetables.[116] John Beale Bordley advocated building a henhouse for easier collection of guano; the free-ranging habits of the flocks was one reason this method of fertilizing was not universally employed.[117] Landon Carter followed these recommendations and also experimented on his own. He found that watering his cauliflower with water steeped in hen dung greatly increased his yield, and that flax and hemp had similar

success when watered this way.[118] He also believed that sprinkling his wheat field with "fine old hen dung" prevented its destruction by a certain type of fly. It had the additional benefit of nourishing the soil with "rich salts to encourage the growth of plants."[119]

The raising of cocks for fighting was yet another aspect of poultry farming. Cock-fighting had been common in Britain and Europe since Roman times, but it reached its heyday during the Georgian period. The frenzied matches between towns and counties which prevailed in eighteenth century Britain were never quite duplicated in America. Nonetheless, it was a popular sport in the Southern colonies.[120] Tutor Philip Fithian not only had trouble keeping his older boys in the classroom because of their zeal for cock-fighting, but was himself urged to attend such an event "where 25 cocks are to fight, and large Sums are betted, so large at one as twenty-five Pounds...."[121] William Byrd was another enthusiast though it is unclear whether or not he raised cocks. In the 1760s, Landon Carter raised Bantam cocks, which he housed separately and kept under special care.[122] Such fowls were the earliest specimens of selective breeding in the colonies of Virginia and Maryland. Fighting cocks were generally of mixed breeds throughout the colonial

period, but there was some attempt to select for sharp talons, large bodies, and high color. The common people preferred "shake bag" or very large cocks, and the progeny of a number of these more sucessful birds were followed closely. Bantams, a small, very fierce bird imported from the Far East, were among the first pure- bred birds established in the area. Though sometimes decried as a bloody and vulgar sport, cock-fighting gave the impetus to improvement in the poultry yard through the search for better housing, and improved methods of breeding.

From the beginning of colonization there was an informal, but brisk business in poultry and their by-products. Chickens flourished so well that the Jamestown settlers sold their excess to new immigrants, including those arriving as far away as Maryland. They turned a good profit, getting as much as fifty shillings for a turkey in 1634.[124] Robert Carter of Nomini Hall reckoned the poultry meat sold as part of his crop yields, and Robert Beverly lisited Virginia market price for poults, capons, turkeys and chickens.[125] Farmers like John Beale Bordley took care to preserve their eggs in lime and salt, in order to sell when the market was high.[126] Those living near cities such as Baltimore, Annapolis, or Alexandria, had the advantage of a ready market. Maryland farmer,

Richard Parkinson described the farmers arriving in Baltimore at the end of the eighteenth century, their goods heavily weighted towards products of the poultry yards. "A farmer's waggon in America when she comes into market," he wrote, "is something like a pedler's pack: it consists of butter, eggs, fruits, potatoes, turnips, cucumbers, chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys...."[127] Court records also indicate that fowls and eggs could be bought through tobacco factors, who probably got their supply from local farmers.[128] One Pennsylvania farmer, calculating carefully, figured his annual profit from poultry at £10, a not inconsiderable sum.[129]

Not every farmer believed poultry raising to be highly profitable, however. After farming a number of years near Baltimore Richard Parkinson cautioned that poultry ate so much that it was uneconomical to raise them to sell. He referred to turkeys as "those voracious animals, which will devour as much as any quadruped on the farm, not excepting even the hog....Calculate if you will," he concluded, "what a turkey will cost by the time he is fit for the spit." Geese, he believed, were somewhat more profitable because of their feathers, but were still expensive to maintain.[130] Thomas Tusser also warned of the destructiveness of the birds to fields and crops.

> With peacock and turkey, that nibble off top
> Are very ill neighbors, to seely poor hop.(131)

Despite the flourishing local business in poultry, eggs, and feathers, these commodities were rarely exported during the colonial period. The fragile and perishable nature of the product had something to do with this, though New England merchants resolved the problem by shipping their poultry live, chiefly to the West Indies. Advertisements in the Virginia Gazette between 1742-1749 list the contents of ships leaving that colony, with over twenty different exports, but poultry products are not among them.[132] The author of American Husbandry compiled a table of the exports of Maryland and Virginia before the American Revolution, but poultry, eggs, or feathers were again omitted.[133] Another eighteenth century reporter in Maryland, wrote that "the only Commodities exported hence besides Tobacco are Wheat and Indian Corn, Bread, Flour, Bar and Pigg Iron, Skins, Furs, Lumber, and some Flax Seed...."[134] Even in 1792, only 1,174 dozen chickens were reported as exports from all of the Southern states, compared with over 89,000 barrels of ham and bacon.[135] Apparently, though lucrative, poultry raising remained something of a cottage industry during the colonial period, with only small surpluses sold to local markets.

APPENDIX

Fowl smothered in oysters

Fill the bird with dry oysters, and sew up and boil in water just sufficient to cover the bird, salt and season to your taste - when done tender, put into a deep dish and pour over it a pint of stewed oysters, well buttered and peppered, garnish a turkey with sprigs of parsley or leaves of celery; a fowl is best with a parsley sauce.

Amelia Simmons, American Cookery

Directions for Roasting a Goose

Take some sage, wash and pick it clean, and an onion, chop these very fine, with some pepper and salt and put them into the belly; let your goose be clean picked and wiped dry with a dry cloth, inside and out; put it down to the fire, and roast it by oven. One hour will roast a large goose, three quarters of an hour, a small one. Serve it in your dish, with some brown gravy, apple sauce in a boat, and some gravy in another.

Hanna Glasse, The Art of Cookery

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