

Farmers Club: From the Lyceum to the Fair

If, as was said in the mid-19th century, “No town much interested in agriculture [should be without a Farmer’s Club](#),” West Newbury led the way. On December 6, 1856, at the Ordway homestead on Indian Hill the West Newbury Farmers Club was set into motion, the [first in Essex County](#).

In quiet winter months farmers in Town met at homes and later in meeting halls to consider [issues of husbandry](#)—and to socialize, very often at non-farmed [oyster suppers](#). Sometimes speakers were invited, though most often members read their own essays. The Club “[answer\[ed\] all the purposes of a lyceum](#),” covering topics from [The Application of Manures](#) and [The Goat](#) to [Electricity](#) (with experiments) and [Does Revolution and the Question of Human Maintenance Now Stirring the Masses Indicate the Necessity of a Revolution in Our Industrial System](#).

In 1866 the Club’s membership expanded beyond “[live men who reside in one of the best agricultural towns in the county](#)” by invitation to “[Gentlemen from other towns](#) who feel an interest in Agriculture, or Horticulture.” Women—dead or alive—were not members and certainly not officers or speakers, although a vote might be taken to [invite ladies to a meeting](#). Women did, however, provide decorations (prompting a [newswriter to ask](#) “and why should they not belong to a Farmers’ Club?”), [parade participants](#), and, of course, “home-made and home-cooked [[dinners made](#)] by women who know how to keep house and make their [husbands and sons happy and contented](#).”

Members’ farms could be 100-acre spreads or “[a nice garden nicely tilled](#)”—and flowers counted. Gentleman farmers contributed greatly to the Club’s success. Washington-based journalist and author [Ben: Perley Poore](#), an enthusiastic agriculturalist at West Newbury’s Indian Hill Farm, was a founder. E. Moody Boynton, an entrepreneur, ever-aspiring politician, and self-styled “[sage and inventor of West Newbury](#),” also lent prestige and connections. [Haydn Brown](#), a self-made combmaking industrialist, state senator, local official, and Town benefactor (the [Haydn Brown steamer](#) was an important gift to the fire department) served for years as the [Club’s president](#). He provided lectures, premiums for entries at the fairs, and doubtless leadership and organizational talents in the “[flourishing days](#)” of the Farmers Club.

Then and now, the Farmers’ Club was most known for its September fairs. They began around 1860 as [picnics at the Ordway homestead](#) with parlor displays of “[brobdignangian](#)” vegetables and many now-lost varieties of apples and other fruits. In 1869, the Club first advertised its farmers’ festival to be held at Town Hall and on the Training Field—“[Tickets, 10 cents](#).” This fair featured not only agriculture, but also “the [mechanics and the artisans of West Newbury](#) [were] present with the products of their skill and industry and there [was] speaking and music to enliven the scene.”

By 1872, the festival was an institution: all other business in West Newbury halted that day. Town Hall was “[filled to overflowing](#) with fruits, flowers, vegetables, and fancy work from the fair fingers of West Newbury dames and damsels, and around the building were pens for the exhibition of cattle, sheep, poultry and swine, of all of which there was a fine and abundant display.” In 1873 the fair included all that went before, plus premiums paid for such items as the “best pair of [Knitted Stockings by a lady over 55 years of age](#),” five yokes of oxen on exhibition and a large tent on the Training Field where “[\[b\]etween six and seven hundred persons](#) sat down to dinner at 2 o’clock.”

As the fair grew ever bigger and better, hosting thousands, logistics became increasingly challenging. In 1883, special runs of the [steamer May Queen and Little’s Stage](#) transported fairgoers. In 1894, a printed “[Arrangement of Committees](#)” detailed the purpose and membership of 46 different fair committees. Generals and governors needed to be invited to speak. Entries needed to be solicited and judged with premiums awarded. Livestock needed to be penned, fed, and their output managed. Flowers, vegetables, fruits, and fancy work needed to be displayed. [Bicycle, three-legged, sack, and potato races](#) needed organizing.

In 1887, the Club’s president reported that young men were not joining and the [ranks were depleting](#). The Club and its fairs continued through the 1890s, but began to [be in doubt](#), with attendance declining. By 1901, the Farmers Club was “[about to disband or take some such action](#)” as interest had died out. Yet “Members “[Refuse\[d\] to Give Up](#).” On [September 11 and 12, 1901, a final farmers fair](#) was combined with an old home week in hopes that former residents would return to once more “[enjoy the pleasures of the fair](#).” .

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**THE WEST NEWBURY
Farmers' Club,**
WILL HOLD THEIR
ANNUAL FAIR,
AT THE
Town Hall, Sept. 21, 1876.

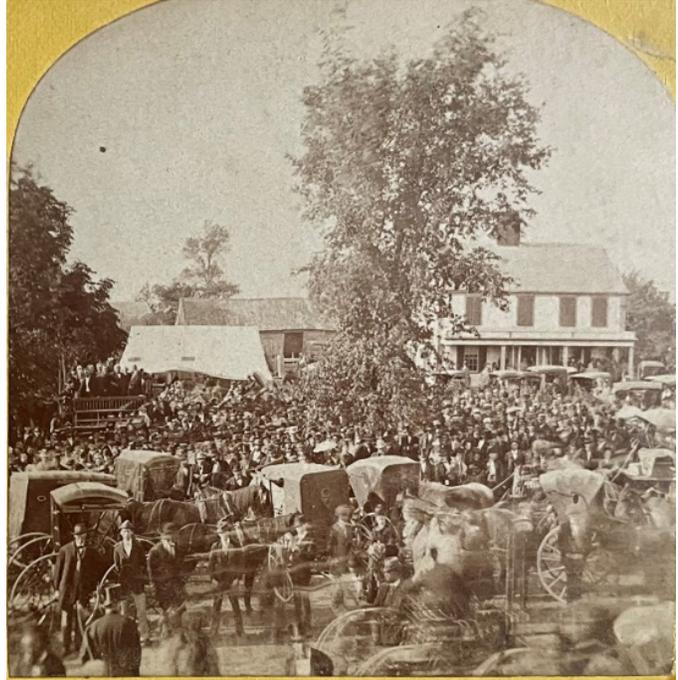
Among the speakers who have promised to be present are
GOVERNOR RICE,
Dr. J. R. NICHOLS.
Hon. WM. D. NORTHEND,
BENJAMIN P. WARE,
BEN. FERLEY POORE.

While other distinguished speakers are expected to be there.

Premiums will be offered on Stock, Grain, Vegetables, Fruit, Flowers, Fancy Articles, Butter and Poultry.

THE HAVERHILL CORNET BAND will be in attendance during the day, which will close with a Promenade Concert and Dance in the evening. e12-3td3tw§

Above: [9/12/1876 Newburyport Herald](#)



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Full copy of the 29-page poem available [here](#)

