

Makayla MacGregor

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The Cumberland Fair: A Significant September Tradition Since 1868

Crisp autumn air, blithe pumpkins aglow, and steamy spiced cider - the Cumberland County Fair is an annual tradition that sparks autumnal sentiments across southern Maine. For most families, it's a festive night to see the livestock and play in carnival games, but for others it's the culmination of a year of planning for a widely influential event. Despite its brief duration at the end of September, the fair has a profound impact on Maine; in history as well as today its significance reaches much more than just the pleasure of families. The particular demonstrations upheld for tradition has not only provided Cumberland with a yearly fall celebration, but it has also deeply shaped women's independence, economics, and local culture in Maine through its agrarian roots.

The Cumberland Fair began in October of 1868, where today Greely High School stands ("History" 2017). Contextually, this was a time of significant change in the United States - it was Reconstruction era, and only several months earlier citizenship was granted to all people born in the United States, under the newly adopted 14th Amendment. A few years later a track was laid out in a pasture in town, where influential fair attractions like harness racing would take place. Eliphalet Greely, a prominent Cumberland citizen, was among a group of residents to petition the state of Maine and thence form the Cumberland Farmer's Club in 1875 ("History" 2017). These were the societal and literal foundations of the fair that still exists today, perpetuating through a

tumultuous beginning of the twentieth century. Fire burned down the hall in 1917, and due to World War I and an outbreak of flu it wasn't rebuilt until 1921 ("History" 2017). However, the fair rebounded, and to this day it is a symbol of the agricultural principles that it was founded upon.

From the beginning, the typical New England county fair incorporated domestic creations into its exhibits. In the early nineteenth century, Massachusetts agriculturalist Elkanah Watson introduced his Berkshire Agricultural Society with an emphasis on homemade crafts - this would serve as a model for developing fairs, including the Cumberland County Fair. Thus the exhibit hall of embroidered fabrics, polished pottery, woolen mittens, and a myriad of other handmade manufactures was established (Kelly). This territory was chiefly attributed to women, and would be for almost two more centuries; ergo, while the fairs certainly focused on the animals and labor of the male farmers, they gave a significant role to women. Cloth in particular was a product of the fairs that women were recognized for, because in an increasingly industrial society, independent fabrications were appreciated more. New England was experiencing rural capitalism, and materials that had always been produced at home were now being mass-manufactured in factories; hence, the goods displayed at the fair emanated a progressively obsolete art (Kelly). By the 1870s, when the Cumberland County Fair was taking shape, women were given ample opportunities to show off their needlework and culinary skills to the town - talents that otherwise were known only to their household and weren't received by the public ("History" 2017). Though the autumn fair was a newfound chance for women to display their dexterity and creativity, it should be acknowledged that it was not a revolutionary advancement for them. Women were still subordinate to men, and their inclusion in the success of the fair was

not due to pushes for rights but instead because their products would, as a whole, benefit other citizens of the town (Kelly). Nevertheless, Cumberland's establishment of a yearly fair was a major step forward for women's independence. For the first time, many females in the town were able to receive praise alongside their husbands and play an economic role in the town.

Though the economic impact of the fair might seem negligible due to the Cumberland fair lasting no more than a week, it has greatly promoted monetary profits as well as garnered support for local businesses. Between the revenue from crafts in the exhibition halls, harness racing (a fundamental event of the Cumberland fair), and other contests, the weeklong event stimulates the town's economy and provides revenue to the vendors and farmers. In fact, harness racing alone is a critical event in terms of economic success. Naturally, spectators at the races spend money, but horse racing also mandates that the owners of the horses spend a significant amount of money throughout the year to provide care for the animals. At just the Cumberland fair of 2016, live track wagering at the harness races brought in a net total of \$105,908, with at least 35,000 attendees (Trigom). Harness racing alone would have a direct impact on Cumberland's agrarian economy, but with the accompanying profits from the carnival games, contests, craft purchases, and food, the fair is a magnet for the money-spending public. However, earnings don't just benefit individuals at the fair and the economy itself - the Cumberland fair bolsters local Maine businesses. Today, with immensely affluent corporations such as Amazon, smaller companies struggle to stay afloat, especially in a society that is becoming more dependent on online shipping. Fairgoers contribute to the prosperity of these, putting money into Maine businesses that they would likely not have a chance to purchase from otherwise. The Southern Maine Maple Sugarmakers Association, or SMMSA, is a prime example because of

their yearly exhibit at the Cumberland fair that features food to purchase as well as educational demonstrations about maple. With foods such as maple cotton candy for sale, the sugarhouse receives a large income from its stint at the fair each year. In addition, the SMMSA intertwines its economic viabilities with other local businesses: in 2018, ice cream from Shain's of Maine and coffee from Wicked Joe's was sold, thereby spreading profits between small businesses (SMMSA 2018). Though vast corporations across America are devouring the majority of expenses, the Cumberland fair is a crucial benefactor to businesses like the SMMSA.

The fair supported women's independence in past years, and today it is a significant economic contributor, but something that has remained concretely vital from 1868 to this year is cultural influence. Referring to the fair as a pedestal of culture is seemingly vague, but on the contrary, there is such a potpourri at the fair that the umbrella term "culture" is most applicable. Whether it is the homemade afghans and wood carvings, the Maine potato french fries and apple crisp, or even the live music, eccentricities of local culture are abound in every aspect of the fair (Paradysz). Learning opportunities are profuse as many exhibits are designed to honor the heritage of Cumberland and its agricultural foundations. Hence, the agrarian culture is abound in every aspect of the fair; for instance, the yearly pumpkin contest, while entertaining in nature, is also a proponent for farming. Last year, more than 75,000 people attended the fair - an indication that almost a hundred thousand people were exposed to various cultural elements of the horde of exhibits (Paradysz). Even without records of attendance at every fair, the idea that "autumn festivals [mark] an important milestone in the rural calendar" (Kelly) testifies to the widespread effect of these cultural components. Most of the people at the Cumberland fair reside within or near the community; according to a 1981 survey, 49% of fairgoers lived less than ten miles away

from the fairgrounds (USM 1981). The high population of local Mainers contributes to the cultural atmosphere of the fair; however, there is also a high number of visitors from farther away. In the same survey, it was found that 14% were from more than fifty miles away, suggesting that cultural exchanges and diffusion also occur at the fair simply due to the number of people who live outside Cumberland being exposed to the county's particular agrarian lifestyle. Alongside the explicit exhibitions of Maine products and crafts was community itself. The Cumberland fair "promote[s] good fellowship and the spirit of cooperation" (MAAF), as it is, in essence, an exchange of ideas and products with the underlying intention of entertainment. Though it lasts only one week of the year, the extent of planning necessitates the collaboration of Cumberland residents to organize each exhibit and event. The circulation of ideas is what propels the vivid culture into every aspect of the fair, with a variety of demonstrations and people coming together to pull off the event (Krosnicki). Thus, the fair is a symbol of community customs, appreciated by those living within the county and attend each year, but also by those visiting who have less exposure to Maine principles and lifestyles.

William Dean Howells, a writer on a trip to New England, once described that the "air was electric with the holiday emotion" on his visit to a county fair (Kelly). The Cumberland County Fair epitomizes this; lifelong residents of Cumberland that devoutly attend each year emphasize the significance of the tradition. Alongside Halloween and Thanksgiving - widely popular autumnal celebrations - the Cumberland County Fair is quite important as a revered custom in the local area. People young and old flock to the festival every year, but so much more comes from the fair than just a memorable night out in September. It's a reminder of the early recognition of women's role in society, an economic breadwinner to local businesses, and an

animated epicenter of traditional agriculture. The people are at the heart of the event; from when it began to present day, the fair has been built upon the efforts of volunteers, farmers, and artisans of the community. The Cumberland fair may be an emblem of history and agriculture, but most of all it's a vibrant microcosm of Maine culture.

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