

Diary of a farm wife

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

From Diary 1834-1893, Penelope Eliza Howard Alderman Papers #4479, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

As you read...

Penelope Alderman (1834-1893) lived in Sampson County, North Carolina, with her husband Amariah B. Alderman, a Baptist minister. Her diary records her daily activities and includes information about the daily life of a farm wife in antebellum North Carolina. In 1854, the time period covered by this excerpt, Penelope was the mother of two children and was expecting another. She and her husband would eventually have twelve children.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What type of information does Penelope Alderman record in her diary?
2. Why do you think this information was important to her?
3. How does Alderman's diary differ from the diaries of James Evans and Henry Harrington? How are these three diaries similar?
4. How many people came to visit Alderman over the course of a month? What does this tell you about family and community in antebellum North Carolina?
5. Who came to work on the Aldermans' farm? Why do you suppose the Aldermans needed this assistance?
6. How often was Penelope's husband absent? How do you think his absences affected the running of the farm and the household?

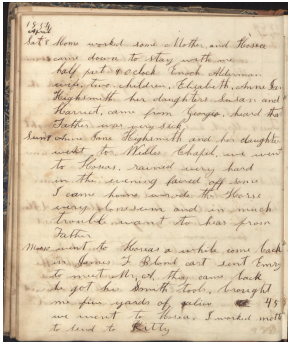


Figure 1. Page from Penelope Alderman diary.

APRIL 1854

Mond. 3. Wove some. Mr. A. ploughing¹ and took the head ache very hard, cool and fair. Not well

Tues. 4. Mr. A had hard head ache all night. Some better, not much work of any kind. Do not read much, and the time is so rapidly going.

Wed. 5. Washed, wove some, warm and fair Mr. A. with head ache

Thur. 6. Mr. A. planted his corn. Martha A. Blane [and] David Newton going to be married. Fair warm

Fri. 7. Mr. A. started to the sound². Emry³ went to Boneys⁴ and brought the horse back. Wove some. Fair and warm not very well. Mother A. came down to stay but did not by my self.

Sat. 8. Home, worked some. Mother and Hosea⁵ came down to stay with me. Half past 1 o clock Enoch Alderman⁶ wife, two children, Elizabeth, Anne Jane Heighsmith her daughter Susan and Harriet came from Georgia headed to Fathers. Was very sick

Sun. 9. Anne Jane Heighsmith and her daughter went to Weddles Chapel, we went to Hoseas. Rained very had in the evening faired off some. I came home rode the horse. Very lonesome and in much trouble, want to hear from Father.

Mon. 10 Went to Hoseas a while, came back in James F. Bland cart. Sent Emry to meet Mr. A. They came back. He got his Smith tools, brought me five yards calico⁷. We went to Hosea. I worked motto⁸ to send to Kitty.

April Tues. 11. We went to Fathers to see him. He had got better all the rest were tolerable well we were very tiard. Left Emry at Hoseas. The children took very bad colds. Very cool windy but fair went through Clinton⁹

Wed. 12. Went to Thomas A. and Uncle Winson [and] Aunt Dicy met us there after dinner mother went. We went back. I was very sick with sick stomache and misary though me. Bro Jacob and wife and her granmother went to see me but I could not sit up. Aunt Polly went; fair.

Thur. 13. Better but very sore. Aunt Polly came and Isabella, mother give me some cloth, children very unwell. Cloudy and warm.

Fri. 14. Very unwell after dinner. Mr. A. Started to Limestone meeting house to preach in Kennedys place and see Dr. Thomas and Kennedy coming to Bethel. Fair and warm. I wrote a letter and started it with a drawing in it to Mother Howard. Mr. A. weather boarded¹⁰ the far side of his shop before he started. By myself, worked a large motto for Mr. A.

Sat. 22. Worked some on papas plants, Hosea came down, planted some wine seed that came from Georgia, worked at small motto for Mr. A. Susan came down to stay, thundered very heavy this evening but no rain. Fair and warm the beautiful spring.

Sund. 23. Susan went home. Beautiful day [with] Enoch and family, Elizabeth, mother went home with J. N. Bland. By my self.

Mon. 24. Mr. A. returned bought one stay¹¹ at Kenansville¹², 1 00
At Kenansville, one candle 25
3 bunches cotton [illegible] 1. 95 2.85
Worked some. Hosea came down to stay. Fair and warm.

Tuesday 25. Worked some fair and warm. Hosea came to stay. Mr. A not well.

Wed. 26. Mr. A. went to Clinton and back to get some things for his buggy. [illegible] very busy at worked J J not well¹³ Mary Eliza came down and then back. Enoch and family return to Hosea

Thurs. 27. Washed piece of cloth for countprints. Mr. A went [to] Taylor Allen Johnson to get collard plants but failed and to. Hoseas and Joseph then fixed my harnisess Enoch went to Louise, then took supper here then to Hoseas. Fair and warm.

Fri. 28. Went to Williby Powells and got some collard plants, and set them out. Planted some. Bernice, Susan, Sallie Rogers came down. Cool and rainey

Sat. 29. Drew my count prints in the harness. Hosea ploughed some. Enoch come and worked some on his wagon. Lucy Ann Rackly, James Rackly, Hiram Page came, cool and cloudy. Not very well. John Thomas walking.

Sun. 30. Went to Bethel. Mr. A. and cousin R. Newton preached. Left children home at 7 o clock Mr A. preached at Hoseas. Carried Penny Ann¹⁴. Mary Hams Feby Newton come with us cool and fair. J. J. walking.

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Notes

1. A plow (plough) cuts through dirt and turns it over in preparation for planting. Plows at this time were pulled by horses, oxen, or mules.

The fact that Ameriah Alderman ploughed his own field suggests that the Aldermans were not wealthy enough to own slaves or to hire day laborers to do the farm work. It is possible that the Alderman owned one or two slaves, but on small farms slaves and farmers often worked side by side.

By the 1860s, the Alderman's fortunes had improved, and they owned three slaves.

2. A sound is a narrow passage of water or a strait between the mainland and an island. There are many sounds along the North Carolina coast, so it is difficult to know which sound Alderman was referring to.
3. Emry could have been a slave or a free black employed by the Alderman's.
4. Boney was a neighbor of the Aldermans.
5. Hosea is most likely Penelope's brother.
6. Enoch was her brother-in-law.
7. Calico is an inexpensive printed cotton fabric that has a small, colorful over-all pattern, which is often floral.
8. A motto is a type of needlepoint that contains a phrase such as "Home Sweet Home" or a verse from the Bible.
9. The Aldermans lived close to Clinton, North Carolina.
10. Weatherboarding is a series of panels nailed to the side of a wall or door. The panels overlap and help keep out rain and wind.
11. Mr. Alderman stayed one night at a lodge or tavern in Kenansville.
12. Kenansville is about 22 miles west of Clinton.
13. J.J. was Penelope's son.
14. Penny Ann was her daughter.

About the author

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Figure 1 (page 2)

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