

Seasons on a farm

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

From diary of James Evans, 1851-1859. James Evans Papers, Collection #248, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Biographical note from the finding aid of the James Evans Papers Collection.

As you read...

ABOUT JAMES EVANS

James Evans was a son of Josiah Evans of Cumberland County, N.C. He married Martha Henrietta Knight in 1839; they had eleven children, including sons James Jr., Josiah, and Oliver, and daughters Larry, Cecilia, Sue Douglas, and Henrietta. Before the Civil War, Evans was a farmer. After the war, he went into business with James Evans, Jr., running a general store. In the last years of his life, Evans wrote many essays and articles for the *Fayetteville News*. He died in 1869. (Source: Southern Historical Collection (see <http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/e/Evans,James.html>).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What type of information did Evans record in his diary?
2. Why do you think this information was so important that Evans chose to record and save it?
3. How might Evans have used these records to help him make decisions about his farm?

1851

We had a hard frost on Friday March 21/51 ice a plenty, in fact the Sump¹ was froze hard we had to pour hot water in it to thaw it. Peach trees in full bloom. Friday night quite cloudy — rained on Saturday & turned quite warm. We had a little frost on the 9 & 10 of Apr. 51 13 & 14 cool & cloudy — on 15 we had considerable frost on the 22nd we had some frost, & on the 23rd we had a hoary frost², weather quite dry, consequently no serious injury³ — Aug 15 peaches & apples very plenty.

I gathered 2 qts⁴ Scuppernong grapes⁵ on Saturday the 23rd Aug - 1851.

1853

We had a real snow storm on the 5 March 1853 — A very heavy frost on the 16 & considerable on the 24. Heavy Frost Apr. 8 some frost 27 Apr.

We planted Irish Potatoes⁶ on Good Friday the 25 of March/53 — June 15 complete failure, drought. We bedded slips⁷ on the 30 of March, sprouted very well. First lit out 24 June. No rain in May till 24 June. Commenced planting corn Apr. 1 & finished on the 30 Apr. We planted New ground 12 & 13 May. Corn up awful bad, it being decidedly the drought & the coldest spring I ever saw — Planted peas June 15 finished July 6. Com⁸ hilling Corn⁹ July 1 finished July 20/53 — Corn getting fodder¹⁰. Aug. 22 Finished. Sept 22 First Frost — Sept 20 quite considerable.

1854

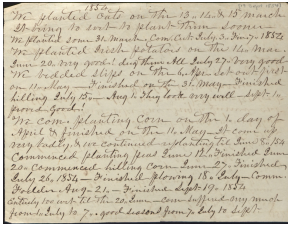


Figure 1. Page from James Evans diary.

We planted oats on the 13, 14, & 15 March. It being too wet to plant them sooner. We planted some 31 March. Corn cut July 4. Finish 7 1854. We planted Irish potatoes on the 14 Mar. June 20 very good! Dug them all July 27, Very good. We bedded slips on the 31 May — Finished hilling July 15 — Aug 1 They look very well Sept 1 — proved good!

We com planting corn on the 1 day of April & finished on the 11 May — It came up very badly & continued planting till June 8/54. Commenced planting peas June 12, Finished June 20, commenced hilling corn June 27, Finished July 26, 1854 — Finished plowing 18, July — Comm. Fodder Aug 21 — Finished Sept 18, 1854. Entirely too wet till the 20 June — corn suffered very much from July to 7, good season from 7 July to Sept.

Winter/spring 1857

Ellick died on the 8 of Dec/56 — 3 O'clock. A. M. Jan. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 & 16 clear & cold — 17 Cloudy rainy — 18 All powerful Snow Storm, wind high, desperate cold 19 & 20 clear & cold — 21 very cloudy, snowed some 22, 23, & 24, clear & very cold, Snow hardly melted any — 25, 26, 27 clear & cold — 28 Cloudy, Drizzly, Snow melting very fast — 29 Cloudy Drizzly, Snow nearly all gone. 20 quite cloudy but no rain, 31 Cloudy Rainy, some snow left yet — Feb 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, & 8 clear, mild & perfectly Beautiful — 9, 10, 11, & 12 quite cold 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 & 21, very warm — it rained a little on the 16 — 22, 23, 24, 25 clear & pleasant we had a good shower on the night of 25 - 26, 27, 28 somewhat cloudy, but mild. March quite cool & very cold. 3 remarkably cold, ice thick — 4 moderate — 5 quite rainy — 6 & 7 cold — 8 very cold & cloudy, snowed a little & Sleeted — 9, 10, cold & cloudy, 11 quite rainy — 12 clear & cold — 13 rainy & sleeted some.

Summer 1857

It is the general belief that this had been by far the coldest, most disagreeable & backward spring we ever had. Mulberries are very Scarce, & have just commenced ripening — my

best corn is about 8 inches high — generally about 4 --. I am not done seeding corn — The weather is very dry & the corn is missing badly — No potatoes set out, though the sprouts look well — I have no oats — but other peoples are about a foot high — The prospect generally, is decidedly bad. But oh! The flower Garden is filled with the choicest roses, & all nature is perfumed with thin fragrance.

Fall 1857

First killing frost Oct 12 — Tremendous frost & ice a plenty on the 22 [to] 24 Cloudy, drizzly — finished gathering corn Oct 28 — Dug ground peas Nov. 2. Turned out very well, few faulty ones. Dug Potatoes Nov. 2, 3, 4, 5, & 6, The first set out were tolerable good — The 7, Nov & night after was the warmest weather I ever saw in Nov — on the 8 it rained, & the 11 was clear & very cold — Miss Wheeler came here on 11 — Turnips very good (excellent) Misses Wheeler staid 10 days. pd¹¹ her 1.50 — It rained on the Evening of 19 Nov on the 20 tags of ice one foot long — black frost¹² plenty. Freezing in the Sun all day — awful cold for season.

1859

We commenced hauling manure of the 18 Apr 1859 & Finished on the 28 — We planted the Flat swamp piece on the 16 Apr & the New ground above it, on the 30 — & The new ground on this, the ditch on the 3 May. 4 Planted first low land. 5 planted 2 low land & would have finished planting corn on the 7 but the ground was so dry & hard we had to stop — we picked a qt of ripe Huckleberries on the 5 — Corn plowing Corn on the 9 May — We had a little Shower on the Evening of the 10 & I planted sugar corn, pop corn & water melon seed in the orchard on the 11 —

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Notes

1. A sump is a hole or well built to collect water. Often the water that is collected in a sump is dirty and contains waste such as sewage.
2. “Hoary frost” is a moist frost that leaves a residue of ice.
3. Often a frost will damage fruits and vegetables that have yet to be harvested. Evans notes that the weather was dry, and so “there was no injury” refers to the fact that his crops were not damaged by this hoary frost.

Since this entry is from April, the frost would have affected young plants or — most likely — the buds on fruit trees. When the weather is warm early in spring, fruit trees can put out buds, which can be destroyed by a late frost. (This has happened in recent years in North Carolina.)

4. Quarts.
5. Scuppernong grapes are native to central and western North Carolina and parts of Georgia. They are large white grapes and are often used for making wine.
6. Irish potatoes are white potatoes. Evans also grew sweet potatoes and thus needed to differentiate between the two in his diary.

The term “Irish potatoes” was common in the nineteenth century — even though potatoes are a crop native to America! — because the Irish were known for surviving almost exclusively on potatoes. When Irish potato crops were hit by blight in the 1840s, famine resulted, and thousands of Irish emigrated to the United States. The term can still be heard in North Carolina today.

7. Sweet potatoes are not planted from seeds but from slips, small pieces of potato that have sprouted. To make a slip, you place a piece of a mature sweet potato in water, leaving about half of the potato above the water line. To sprout, a potato also needs heat and sunlight. After a couple of days, the piece of potato will have grown green leaves on top and roots on the bottom. Next, the green leaves and roots are separated into smaller pieces and planted.
8. Abbreviation for “commenced,” which means began.
9. As corn grows, it needs additional dirt around the base of the plant to provide nutrients and to anchor the plant so it will not fall over as it grows. Using a corn hoe, a farmer drags dirt from either side of the corn plant to make a hill around the plant, a process called hilling.
10. *Fodder* is food for cattle. Cattle will eat corn cobs as well as the husks and stalks.
11. Paid.
12. A black frost kills plants and often turns vegetables and fruit black.

About the author

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