

The Chopping Bee

WHEN EARLY COLONISTS GATHERED TO CLEAR THE FOREST FOR A NEW FARM, THE RESULTS COULD BE BOTH DANGEROUS AND SPECTACULAR.

Few tasks facing America's early settlers were more formidable and dangerous than clearing the land. Carving cultivable fields from dense forests was necessary for producing crops in the European style, yet a man by himself could clear only an acre or two a year, and over the course of his lifetime fewer than fifty acres.

The enormity of the challenge was immediately apparent to the first Europeans landing in Tidewater Virginia in 1607. To clear land for the Jamestown Colony, the English adopted from the nearby Powhatan tribe a technique called "girdling." According to Captain John Smith: "The best way we

found in Virginia to spoil the woods was first to cut a notch in the bark a broad band round about the tree, which we pull off and the tree will sprout no more and all the small boughs in a year or two will decay." In other words, they cut deep notches into the trunk and removed a thick wreath of bark.

With the tree's death, enough sunlight eventually could filter through the skeletal branches to enable settlers to plant corn at the base of the trunks, another concept borrowed from the Powhatan.

In New England, early settlers—who initially held a stronger preference for the manicured fields and pastures of their homeland—over time resorted to girdling. But as

still more settlers arrived, they were appalled at the "very singular and dreadful" scene of acres of standing dead trees with crops struggling at their bases. As the scattered communities grew, neighbors learned to help each other with especially daunting tasks—banding together in group efforts called "bees"—one of them being tree removal.

CHOPPING BEES

Settlers rode horseback for ten or more miles to convene at a farm on a specific day to help clear the land. These so-called "chopping bees" were especially popular in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine—all home to great wooded tracts of land—during the late 18th and early 19th Centuries.

"Sometimes this bee was held to clear land for a newly married man, or a new neighbor, or one who had had bad luck," according to historian Alice Morse Earle in her 1898 classic, *Home Life in Colonial Days*, "but it was just as freely given to a prosperous farmer, though plentiful thanks and plentiful rum were the only reward of the willing workers."

Men wielded their axes beginning at dawn, felling as many trees as they could before day's end. When the trees were down, the area was referred to as an "opening." The favored time of year for a chopping bee was spring, and the fallen trees were left where they fell to dry for months in the summer sun.

Come autumn, the farmer set fire to the fallen trees, burning their tops and the smaller limbs and leaving the charred trunks. "Then came what was known as the piling



"Chopping Bee" was an American term, but the 18th-Century concept of having groups of men collectively labor to quickly convert forest timber into usable lumber was known the world over. This drawing in Johann Bernard Basdow's *Manual of Elementary Education*, published in Berlin in 1774, captures the spirit of the bee.



Toppling a tree and stripping it of its limbs and bark is hard enough, but shaping the log by hand for building takes several more hours, as Colonial Williamsburg carpenter Corky Howlett demonstrates.

bee, a perfect riot of hard work, cinders, and dirt," Earle wrote. Neighbors again convened to use horses and oxen to drag and stack the charred trees into large piles to again be set aflame until only embers remained. Over time, the farmer, alone or with the help of others, employed oxen to pull the trunks from the ground to create a suitable field for planting.

THE DRIVE

An ingenious and practical practice at the chopping bee was called "the drive." Here the men chopped only partially through the trunks—called "under-cutting"—on a large number of thickly growing trees. Then, at a given moment, one tree would be toppled. Its branches would crash against the neighboring trees, causing them to fall and strike adjoining trees until an entire swath of forest came crashing to earth with a roar the settlers said could be heard for miles.

The drive, though spectacular to see and hear, was dangerous.

"A heavy and sudden gust of wind might blow down a small tree, which had been carelessly under-cut, and thus give an unexpected and premature collapse of the simple machinery of the grand finale," Earle noted. "It was dangerous work; accidents were frequent; the records of death pathetic to read and to think of in a country where the loss of a sturdy man meant so much to some struggling household."

But when the drive worked, it was a magnificent sight to behold. No one tells it better than Earle as she described a particular chopping bee in the late 1700s. She told of how a husband and wife ventured into the thick forests of south-central New Hampshire, where he cleared just enough land to build a small log cabin, from which all that could be seen were more trees and a scant patch of sky overhead.

Spring came, and on the designated day, several neighbors from distant settlements arrived for the chopping bee. "In front of the log house they chopped all the morning long with sturdy arms and swinging blows," Earle wrote, "yet they felled nothing, till in the afternoon when all was ready for the final blow at the towering leader, which by its fall should lay low a great sloping tract for a dooryard and home field."

"As the noble trees fell at last to the earth with a resounding crash, lo! In the opening there appeared to the startled eyes of the settler's wife, as if rising out of heaven, a neighbor in her loneliness—Mount Kearsarge, grand, serene, and beautiful, crowned with the glories of the setting sun, standing guard over a smiling lake at its foot."

"And every day through her long and happy life till ninety-six years old, as she looked at the splendid mountain, standing as it will till time shall be no more, did she thank God for His gift, for that noble companionship which came so suddenly, so inspiringly, upon the cramped horizon of her lonely forest home." ★

Michelle Erickson



English Delft Charger

Dia. 13"

Based on a 1745 Bristol example decorated in imitation of Chinese export porcelain.

\$295 shipping included
limited availability

Period Designs

401 Main Street
Yorktown, Virginia 23690
www.perioddesigns.com
757-886-9482

Handcrafted in Vermont



AUTHENTIC DESIGNS

(802) 394-7713 • (800) 844-9416
www.authenticdesigns.com