

Living Conditions of the Early Settlers

When the early settlers arrived, the well-established tall, large trees in the virgin forest blocked out most of the sunlight. Because of the density of the trees, there was little undergrowth of small trees and other growth. Springs and small streams were common. The settlers needed to clear areas to provide sunlight for the planting and growing of their crops.

Benjamin Stokely described the climate:

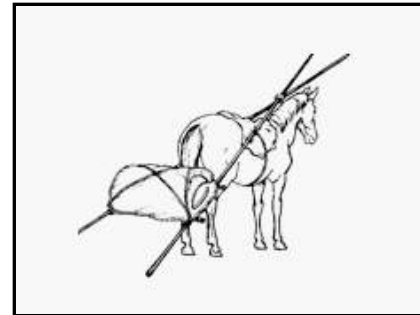
The climate of this county may be considered, in its general character as cold and wet. Winter usually sets in about the latter end of November, and corn is seldom planted much before the latter end of May, which makes nearly six months of cool, cold, and wet weather.

Snow is seldom more than eighteen inches deep; but on the 3d of February, 1800, and the 3d of February, 1818, it was about three feet. Frost is seen, some years, in every month.

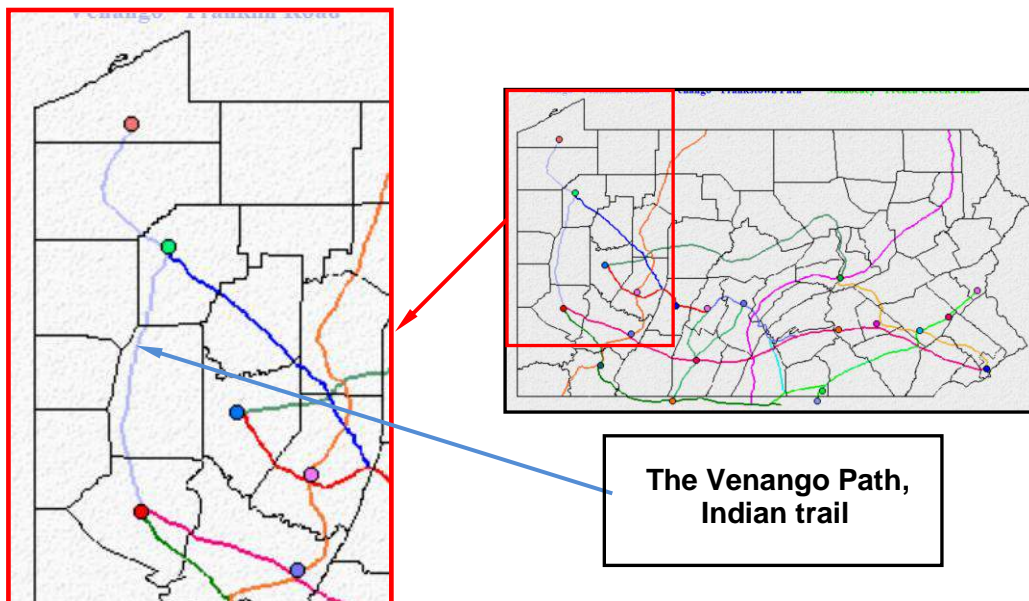
This county has always been subject to annual tornadoes, which seldom happen before the middle of May, nor after the summer solstice.

Settlers usually came with very few possessions. They typically had a packhorse and perhaps a "sled car" (travois), two poles, one fastened on each side of the horse, the other ends dragging along the ground. The sled car was used to transport supplies.

A packhorse could carry about two hundred pounds.



The settlers typically followed the existing Indian trails as they traveled. The major Indian trails are shown on this map.



They brought a few clothes, a skillet, a pot, a few dishes, an ax, and a mattock for clearing land. They also brought garden and grain seeds and a few dry herbs to last them until they could grow crops. They carried only a few farming tools. Most modern farming tools had not been invented. The iron plow was invented in 1797, but it did not come into general use for fifty years. Clothing was generally cloth and made at home. They had little money. The settlers adapted the life style of the Indians to survive.

Their homestead usually began with a small log cabin. If possible, the cabin would be built near a water supply, a creek, or spring. Trees from the property were used to construct the cabin and at the same time begin the process of clearing the land. The cabin was built of equal length logs and assembled into a box. Openings for doors, windows and a fireplace were then cut. Fireplaces were generally made of stone and mortar. Furniture was usually made on site, frequently with branches. The rafters were used for storage.

Additional land was cleared by "girdling" the trees and waiting for nature to fall them. Once down they would be burned clearing the land for building and farming.

There were few domesticated animals. Animals were free-ranged; during the winter, there was seldom enough food for the family and the animals. Wolves were a major problem for the farmer. The native wolves of Pennsylvania were brown and black (*Canis Lycaon*). When hungry, these wolves became aggressive. They would attack domestic animals and it is reported that they would attack people walking alone at night. Although bounties were offered to help reduce the wolf threat, it was many years before wolves were controlled in the area.

The most abundant source of food for the settlers was wild game. Deer and small game were so abundant that growing crops was difficult. Therefore, most of the early settlers relied upon hunting for the provision of meat as the staple of their diet. At the same time, hunting was practiced sparingly because ammunition was expensive. The settlers relied almost solely upon hunting and fishing to survive the winter.

The first plantings were near the cabin. The principal tool of the time was a mattock, a heavy digging tool with a flat blade. Seeding and cultivation was done by hand; harvesting by sickle or cradle. The settlers were helped by the Indians who had seedlings they had acclimated. The Indians also taught the settlers how to fertilize plants and to dry and smoke meats and vegetables for preservation.

Corn, rye, and potatoes were the principal crops. Settlers had little success in raising wheat. The corn was used to make bread and "Johnny Cake". Johnny Cake, originally called journey cake, was eaten by settlers, hunters, and travelers. It was a cornbread pancake cooked in a skillet.

The first cash products were typically potash, lye, and whiskey. The potash came from the burning of the trees in clearing the land for farming. Potash was an important early industrial chemical. The potash could be leached and evaporated into black lye sold as "black salts". The potash lye was used in bleaching textiles, making glass, and in making soap. Whiskey was made from the grain, was always in demand, and easier to transport than grain.

Indian trails were used for travel. Originally, all transportation of goods was done by packhorses. When roads were developed, wagons became the mode of transportation.

The opportunities for marketing the settler's products were limited. Whiskey, pork, deerskins, and furs were traded in the Erie area for fish and salt, and in the Bellefonte area for products such as iron, nails, and in the Pittsburgh area for Groceries and dry goods.

Gristmills, and sawmills and distilleries were early businesses in the county. Gristmills were the source of flour, sawmills provided lumber for construction and whiskey was a transportable product. There were several stills in operation in northeastern Mercer County in the Sandy Lake- Sheakleyville area. Distilleries were established by Jacob Reed in c1800, Hugh Richardson in 1801, and George Sheakley in 1817.

Money was scarce. Bartering was used for commerce and business. Products such as whiskey, salt, maple sugar, and grains were often used as "money". The early stores were often exchange centers where produce was exchanged for products.

Social life was simple and centered on the family. Workdays were long and arduous leaving little time to socialize outside the homestead. Communication with others outside the family was limited. Neighbors, both men and women, gathered to form work parties to help each other. These work parties were a major social activity enabling communication among the workers. The earliest meeting places were the gristmills, saw mills and the taverns.