

Virginia Tobacco

Jamestown Exhibit

When John Rolfe arrived in Virginia in 1610, the Virginia Company had not found a profit-making commodity. Rolfe learned that the Virginia Indians grew a ceremonial tobacco with a “byting taste.” Smokers in England preferred the sweet-scented variety imported from the Spanish colonies in the West Indies.

Aware of tobacco’s growing popularity, Rolfe obtained and planted seeds of this sweet type. He sent a small shipment to England in 1614. By 1616 more than 2,000 pounds were shipped, and by 1620, more than 40,000 pounds. Profits soared and a boom was on. Colonists began planting the “golden weed” everywhere, even, as Governor Samuel Argall noted in 1617, in “the marketplace, and streets, and all other spare places” in Jamestown. As late as 1630 Governor John Harvey reported “no other commodity but tobacco in the colony” and a “great want of corn.”

After almost ten years of failure with various economic ventures, Virginians at last found their cash crop in the “golden weed,” tobacco. Tobacco became the colony’s financial savior.

Colonists quickly gave up all other products to meet the demand in England. As production increased phenominally into the 1620s, tobacco became readily available for mass consumption in England. All classes and genders smoked. Virginia became synonymous with tobacco, and Virginians developed a way of life revolving around its production.

The USDA started keeping limited annual tobacco statistics for Virginia in 1866. For that year, 70,000 acres of tobacco were harvested. The average yield was 640 pounds to the acre and the total Virginia crop was 44.8 million pounds. The value of that crop was estimated at 13.3 cents per pound or 5.96 million dollars. Harvested acreage trended upward from 1866 until it peaked in 1920 at 242,000 acres. Yields have also trended upward since 1866 with the current record yield of 2,320 pounds per acre recorded in 1999. Record tobacco production occurred in 1952 when the state produced 185.1 million pounds. The highest average price received by producers for all tobacco occurred in 2001, and

averaged 1.906 dollars per pound. The most valuable crop in terms of total dollars was in 1981 when the crop was valued at 266.6 million dollars.

How does tobacco compare with the rest of Virginia agriculture? In terms of all dollars received from all agricultural products sold, tobacco’s share has fallen from nearly 20 percent of the total in the early 1960’s to around 3 percent today. This should not be surprising as tobacco quotas are cut, and as Virginia’s agricultural base diversifies. When looking at just crop sales, tobacco is the number four cash crop in Virginia. It was the leading cash crop as late as 2003. In 2006, tobacco sales of 71 million dollars was less than tomatoes, soybeans and corn.





Tobacco Organizations

Dark Tobacco Sales Cooperative
P.O. Box 447
Farmville, VA 23901
434/392-4815
dktobsales@hovac.com

Flue-Cured Tobacco Cooperative Stabilization Corporation
Administrative Operations Manager
P.O. Box 12300
Raleigh, NC 27605
919/821-4560
Fax: 919/821-4564

Sun-Cured Tobacco Marketing Cooperative, Inc.
P.O. Box 447
Farmville, VA 23901
434/392-3785
dktobsales@hovac.com

Virginia Bright Flue-Cured Tobacco Board
P.O. Box 129
Halifax, VA 24558
434/572-4568
Fax: 434/572-8234

Virginia Dark-Fired Tobacco Board
P.O. Box 129
Halifax, VA 24558
434/572-4568
Fax: 434/572-8234

Virginia Dark-Fired Tobacco Growers Marketing Association, Inc.
P.O. Box 447
Farmville, VA 23901
804/392-3785

Virginia Tobacco Growers Association
1968 Henrico Road
Buffalo Junction, VA 24529
434/575-8584

Tobacco Statistics, 2006 ^{1/}

Acres Harvested (acres)	19,650
Flue	17,000
Burley	2,300
Fire	350

Value of Production (thous. dols.) **71,187**

Cash Receipts (thous. dols.) **71,595**

Rank with Other Producing States Based on Production (number) **5**

Virginia Production as Percent of US Total (percent) **6.42**

^{1/} Preliminary.

The ports of Hampton Roads are the largest in the United States in exporting tobacco and tobacco products.

