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Common Job Trends in Early Cumberland

An Eagle Project by Benjamin W. S. Follett

Written using resources from the Prince Memorial Library



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Benjamin W.S. Follett

Prince Memorial Library

Cumberland, Maine

November 2017

A Brief History and Overview

During the years between the late 1860s and the early 1910s, the population of Cumberland decreased by a great number, as did much of the population of the coastal region in Maine. In fact, the population of Cumberland decreased by a third in this time period. Many previous researchers attributed this decline to the growth of manufacturing in large cities, or the complete and total exhaustion of resources along the coast. This information is based mostly on a militia list generated by the town. The lists were updated every two years, with some lapses in the recording. The years recorded were 1865, 1881, 1883, 1885, 1887, 1889, 1891, 1893, 1895, 1897, 1899, 1903, 1905, 1907, 1909, and 1917.

By the beginning of the militia lists, Maine had only been a state for about forty years. Before that, it had been part of Massachusetts. Cumberland was founded in 1821, a year after Maine became a state, and was named by Ephraim Sturdivant, a veteran from the war of 1812. Originally part of North Yarmouth, Cumberland was first settled in 1640. The mother town, North Yarmouth, was officially incorporated in 1680. By this time, there were thirty six families settled by the ocean, and by 1688, the town had reached one hundred sixty families! They were forced out by Native Americans, and the survivors retreated to Jewell Island off the coast, and from there to Boston. North Yarmouth was resettled in 1722, and became truly prosperous in 1760. Soon, the town started to speak out against the British, and aligned themselves with the Continental Congress long before the Revolutionary War began. After the American Revolution, North Yarmouth began to truly flourish as a town.

By the time the lists began in 1865, the railroad had been in Cumberland for a while, beginning in the early 1850s. It helped move jobs out to the surrounding larger cities, all the way from Lewiston to Portland. One could assume that the railroad and it's continued expansion helped move manufacturing jobs elsewhere, also impacting the ship building and shipping industries, alongside the creation of the steel ship. We can attribute these massive metal machines to ship building's downfall, as small operations could not handle the cost of materials and labor required to build even a single vessel. Also, many of these small industries were too far away from the coal and iron needed to create steel, while they were very close to the forests, which provided a very good source of materials for conventional sailing ships. The forests were exhausted over time, making it more and more difficult to find good trees for masts, stems, and decking, everything needed to make a ship. Even smaller fishing boats were less needed, as the number of fishermen dropped off significantly over time, which was then attributed to a lack of fish in the shallower waters.¹ Another possible cause for the smaller number of fish was the railroad. Instead of freshly caught fish, which varied in number depending on the day, one could have fish transported on the railroad from Boston or Portland in bulk, bringing in more product for a much lower price.²

Materials like granite and limestone were also in need at this time. These stones were used for building large commercial structures and paving streets. Before the railroad, the most prosperous stone working operations were not where the good materials were, but instead close to the water for ease of transport. If your quarry was far inland, you would be unable to move materials to a bidder, even if your stone was high quality. However, if you were on the coast, you could easily either put a port next to your quarry, or have a short convoy carry the materials into a nearby shipping port. When the railroad was added, a quarry with high-quality stone could build tracks to connect to a main line, and very easily transport a large amount of product up or down the coast to the buyer, all quicker than the entire shipping process. Ships could still carry far more stone, especially the large, heavy steel vessels, but trains could travel inland and travel much faster than any ship of the era. The railroad also made transport of ice across

¹ Mitchell, H. E. 1877-. The Cumberland And No. Yarmouth Register, 1904. Brunswick, Me.: The H. E. Mitchell pub. co., 1904.

² Bennett, Thomas C. "Cumberland & North Yarmouth." Cumberland & North Yarmouth - Population Decline in Maine's Coastal Counties, Maine, cny.mainememory.net/page/2021/display%3Fpopup=1.html.

the country much easier, which helped advance freezer/cooler technology, as well as increase revenue to Maine. Special carriages were made to move ice, using cold air and sawdust to keep ice from melting too fast. Over time, as food storage technology advanced even more, the ice trade died off, as people could purchase freezers and refrigerators that used electricity, gases, and metal coils to leech heat from inside the machines and dump it outside, making sure the inside would stay perpetually cool. This efficient process rendered a traditional ice box useless and wasteful, while also helping to cut costs, as people had one less thing to buy.

Another industry that died off was the lumber trade. Interestingly enough, the biggest downfall of logging was before the population dropped. Timber was once a truly massive industry in Cumberland. The gigantic pines that had been standing for over a hundred years were perfect for making ships masts, and Maine had forests full of them. Since it was first settled, Maine had been used for logging, and still is to this day. However, in the days before heavy land transportation and paved roads, one couldn't go up north two hundred miles just for timber. Instead, one had to focus on the land near the water, as that was where the shipping industry was. Over two hundred years of almost constant logging, the trees slowly but surely disappeared.

In 1821, Cumberland had become a separate town, and industries such as ship building had become vitally important to its population. The ship building was most common by the sea shore, but there were some operations further inland, where nicer timber was. One such example was at a shipyard near Walnut Hill in North Yarmouth, which would make ships, and then tow them down five to six miles with oxen to the Royal River. Impressively enough, some ships would weigh almost forty six metric tons! They would make the ships in the winter, and place them on river ice and wait for spring to thaw the river. They would then float the ships down the river from there, and sail them out from ports. Cumberland prospered until after the American Civil War, when the population began to drop. We can see this because of records kept by the Cumberland Militia. At this time, the town militia was keeping records of all the military-aged males in the town, in case a need would arise in which a military force would be required. A military-aged male in this sense is described as a man ranging from age 18 to 40, so the records are not one hundred percent accurate when describing the amount of people working, but provide a very good sense as to the numbers of each job, as much of the workforce is represented in these lists.³

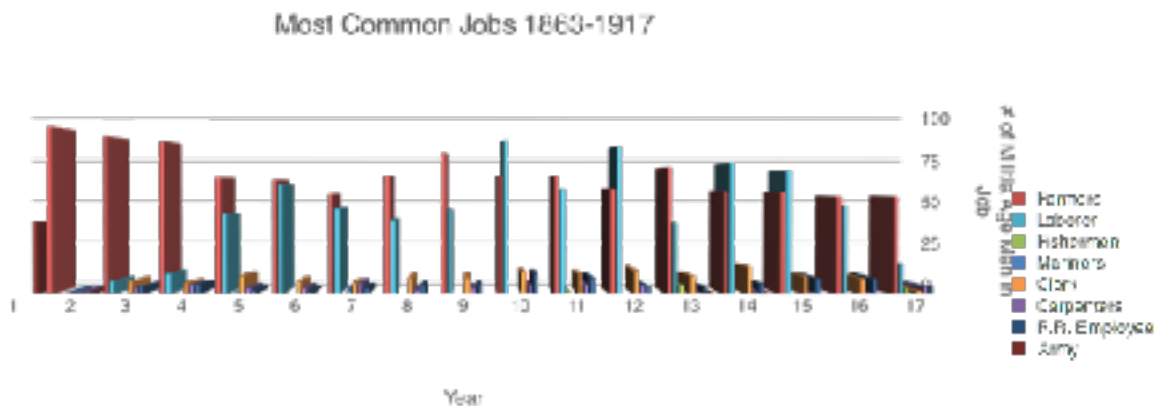
Farming was also a very important industry at this time. Many people practiced subsistence farming, growing only as much as they needed, without selling any to turn a profit. The people who sold crops most often grew large crops of hay, potatoes, corn, and grains in the fertile soil inland from the Atlantic Ocean. Described as "rockless", in some parts, the farmers there were able to sell their goods down the railway as soon as they could harvest their crops. There were also dairy farmers, as well as poultry farmers, which are both listed in the records under their own separate categories. Poultry was a large business, with a typical operation producing between one and two thousand chicks a year. Fishing was also a very big industry, as the town extended out to both Great and Little Chebeague Islands. The island folk were skilled in creating lasting structures by or on the water, as can be seen when passing any of the old, weathered houses on the shore. In fact, most industries in Cumberland relied on the water in some way, be it for sustenance, or powering large equipment like trains and sawmills. Sawmills were very common along the many rivers flowing through the two towns, especially in West Cumberland. There were also some small factories stationed on the banks, although "small" is a relative term. The factory could produce three thousand cans a day at maximum capacity. Interestingly, the floral business was also a very prosperous one, growing mostly carnations. The demand for those was truly enormous, and Cumberland was ready, willing, and able to supply them. In fact, in the early twentieth century, Cumberland was once the carnation capital of the world! The town was truly a range of interesting opportunities for most people, no matter what job you were best at.⁴

³ Mitchell, H. E. 1877-. The Cumberland And No. Yarmouth Register, 1904. Brunswick, Me.: The H. E. Mitchell pub. co., 1904.

⁴ Mitchell, H. E. 1877-. The Cumberland And No. Yarmouth Register, 1904. Brunswick, Me.: The H. E. Mitchell pub. co., 1904.

Analysis of Supporting Data

During the years between the later half of the 1860s and the early 1910s, the population of Cumberland fluctuated very frequently. In these observations, we follow the top five largest jobs in Cumberland, as recorded by the militia lists. One can see from the graphs that the number of farmers had a steady downwards trend, while the second largest occupation, laborer, had a far more parabolic trend. This made for interesting observations that followed the sharp drop in the population that occurred in the early twentieth century, when one-third of the town's population moved elsewhere! A Mr. Leonard O. Packard noticed this in many other places along the coast, and in 1916 wrote an article hypothesizing that it was due to the growth of American manufacturing cities in other places in the American northeast. Thankfully, the population decrease was mirrored very well by the laborers.⁵ The trade saw an immensely steep drop-off from 1905 to 1917, losing 55 workers in just twelve years! One could also see that fishermen and mariners were very present at the time, as Maine was one of the most important shipping locations in the United States. The quickest route to Europe, following the currents, and the quick route to New York City, Boston, and all the other major cities along the Eastern seaboard. Mariners transported ice, fish, lumber, stone, anything that was placed on their itinerary. As the shipping industry became more and more prominent, more and more ships needed to be built. Bath was one of the biggest shipbuilders at the time, and Maine benefited from that. But, when the railroad industry started booming, the water-based shipping industry suffered. Trains were faster, more direct, and more regular. They didn't rely on the wind to push them, instead being propelled by steam engines. This meant that less ice had to be shipped, saving the companies money and materials. In fact, now that the railroad industry was able to bring goods up and down in hours, fresh foods were able to be brought to and from Boston. Clerks were able to purchase cheaper goods, slowly but surely putting fishermen and farmers out of business. Railroads were also able to ship inland, while ships could only go as far as the water went. This means that there was a lack of jobs for people who had trained in their fields for years, knew all there was to know in their one small area of expertise. People would have moved, going to where the jobs were, finding work in the fields they could.



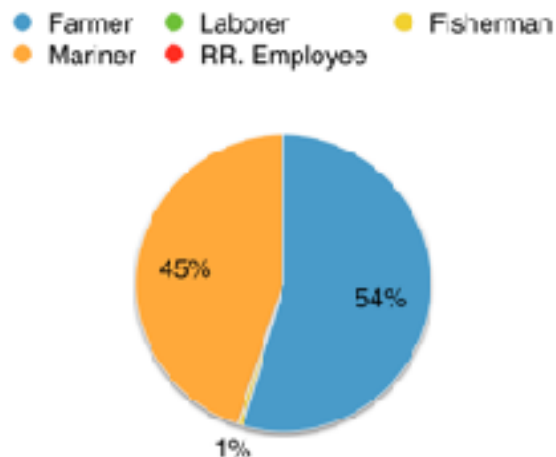
These records were originally a list of military age males who would be able to form a town militia if a need were to arise. The town at that time was not very large, weighing in at 1,713 residents, one-third of which would be gone by 1920. At the time of its founding, Cumberland had only 1,386 residents, and did not gain too many people in its first forty years, and sadly, between 1860 and 1920, lost 563 of its already low population. It would later grow to good size, increasing almost thirty percent

⁵ Packard, Leonard O. "The Decrease of Population along the Maine Coast." *Geographical Review*, vol. 2, no. 5, 1916, pp. 334-341.

each decade to reach 6,009 in 2000. Just by taking a short look at the article and the records together, one could easily see that the conclusions drawn by Leonard Packard were very viable, and most likely true.

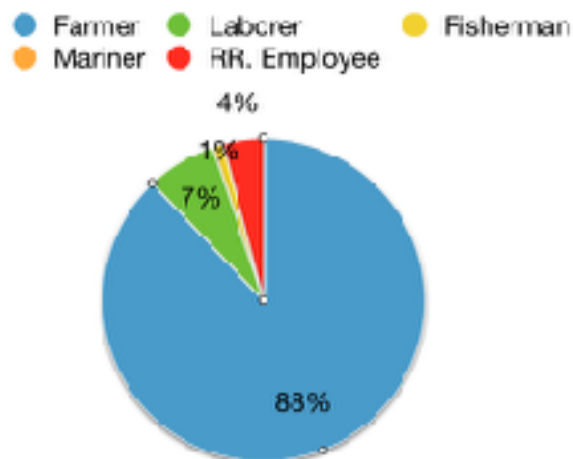
1865-

In 1865, the Cumberland farming industry was at its peak. The American Civil War had just ended, and returning veterans were reinforcing the population in strength. At this time, there was only one listed fisherman, with seventy-five seaman. This was one of the higher points for the shipping industry, and was the peak recorded year. The railroad had not yet entered Cumberland, so the shipping companies were running unopposed.



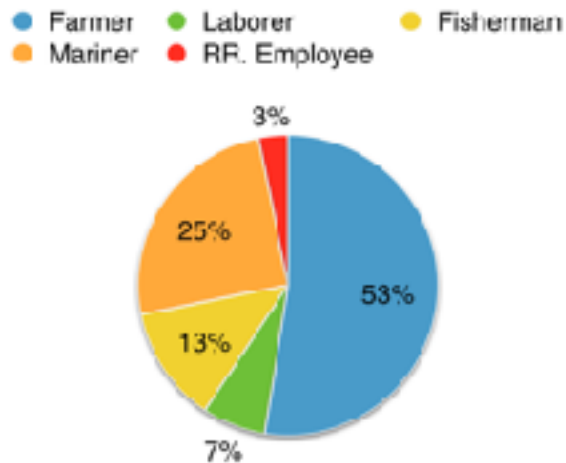
1881-

In 1881, there was a slight decrease in the farming industry, with five people being considered ineligible for the militia for various reasons, be it death, age, or that they moved elsewhere. The town now had dentists, doctors, and clerks to maintain the good health of the town, and run the stores. At this time, there were no registered mariners, which was a very unusual occurrence. The railroad began with four employees, which was very likely a reason for the impressive downfall found in the sailing business.



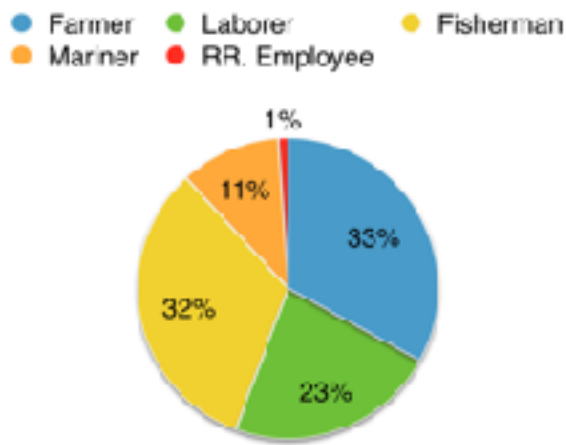
1883-

1883 saw a further decrease in the farming field, from eighty-seven farmers to eighty-four. By this time, there were eleven laborers, thirty-nine mariners, twenty fishermen, and ten traders, a new arrival that became a normality in the town for the next few years. The railroad gained an employee, showing an increased profitability compared to the dropping numbers of mariners.



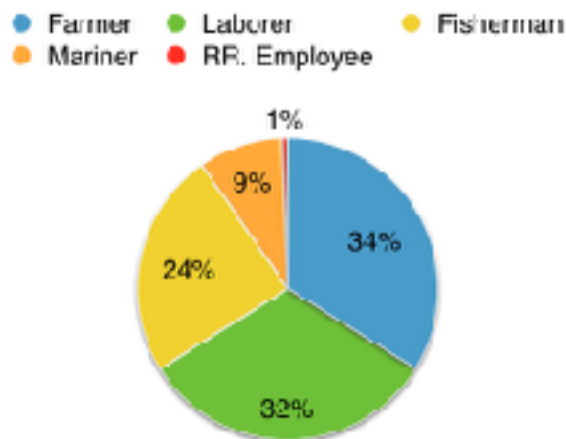
1885-

Fishermen and farmers were nearly equal in numbers during 1885, respectively numbered at sixty-three and sixty-four. A sharp decrease for the farmers, losing twenty in the space of two years, while the fisherman gained forty-three people in that same time frame. The mariners dropped to twenty-one, with ten clerks, forty-four laborers, and eight traders. This also proved to be a bad year for the railroad, as they lost all but two of their employees.



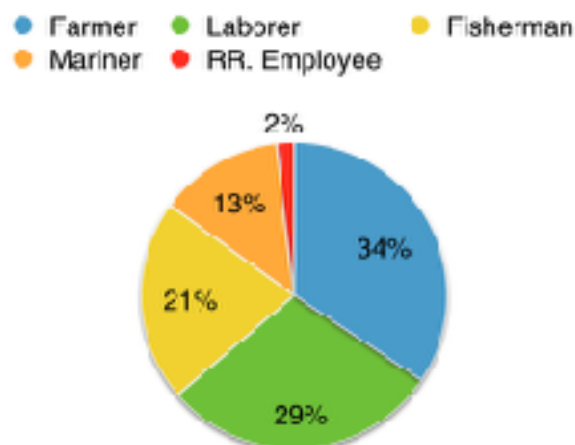
1887-

The gap between fishermen and farmers increased during this time period, with farmers only losing one man, while fishermen lost nineteen. Laborers climbed sharply, with an increase of sixteen men to sixty laborers. Mariners dropped again to seventeen, with traders halving themselves to hit four. Clerks dropped in number as well, losing three to land at seven. The railroad proceeded to decrease even more, showing a lack of business in that private sector.



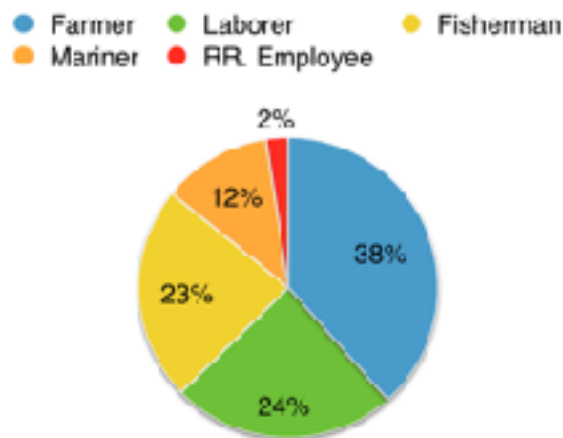
1889-

During 1889, there were yet again less farmers and fishermen. Laborers were following the upward path, while traders decreased to an all-time low. Clerks continued downwards, and mariners began climbing back up. The railroad also showed more promise. They gained two employees, pulling themselves back from the brink of oblivion.



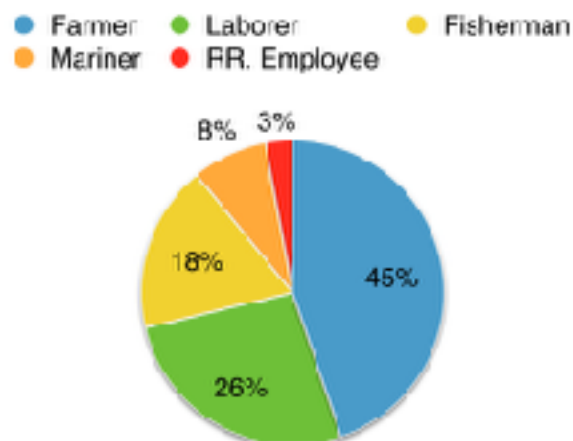
1891-

In 1891, it appeared that the laborers hit a little bump in numbers. They lost three people, while the farmers increased their numbers to climb back into the sixties. Fishermen climbed back to the high thirties, while clerks began to head upwards. Traders pulled themselves back up to four, and mariners slipped down slightly to hit twenty. The railroad found themselves with yet another employee, giving insight to the constant change in the shipping business.



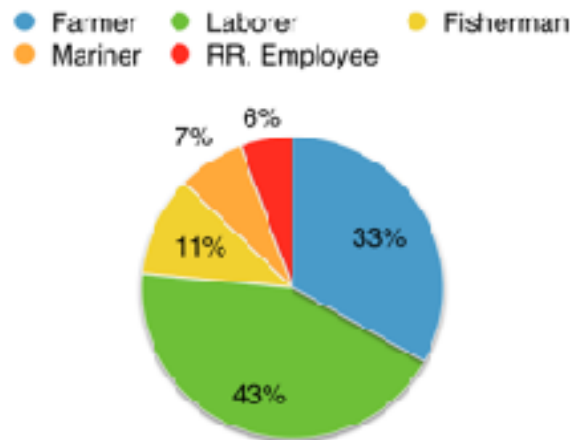
1893-

In 1893, farmers finally began to redeem themselves. They pulled themselves back up into the seventies, while fishermen dropped by eight. Laborers increased, while mariners encountered a large setback. Clerks stayed steady, and traders dropped back to one. The railroad industry continued to climb, and found themselves with yet again five employees. From the contrast between the mariners and railroad employees, we can see that the railroad was benefiting in this period.



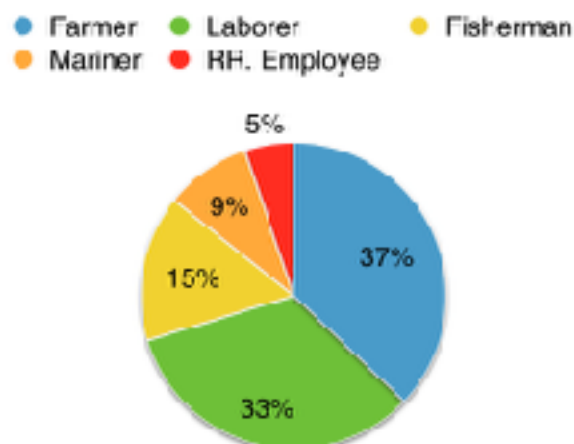
1895-

This may have truly been the year of the Cumberland laborer. Rivaling the all-time high of the farmers, laborers hit a peak of eighty-two, while the fishermen slipped down to twenty-one workers. Clerks rose up to twelve, while traders made a comeback to six. The railroad reached their all-time high of eleven workers, truly showing the impressive shipping power that it held, especially in that day and age.



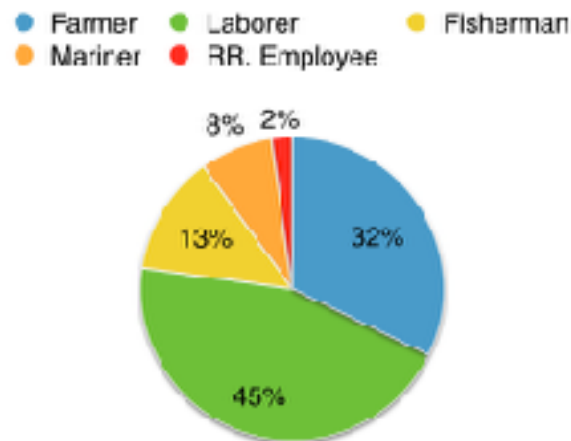
1897-

1897 was a year that would mirror the downward slide of the labor trade. It dropped by twenty-six men, while the farmers stayed steady with the last recorded year, at sixty-five. Fishermen gained five workers, while clerks lost one, as well as traders. The railroad lost two men, while the mariners gained two, yet again in contrast of each other.



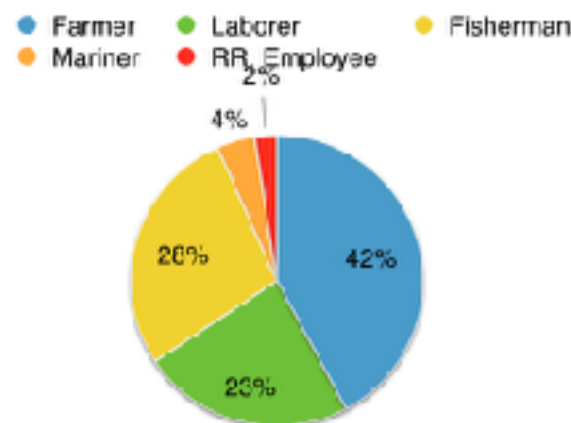
1899-

Surprisingly enough, laborers leaped back up to eighty-one. Farmers dropped by seven, and fishermen lost three. Clerks climbed up to thirteen, while traders found themselves at ten workers. Mariners dropped to fourteen, while the railroad followed, sliding down to four.



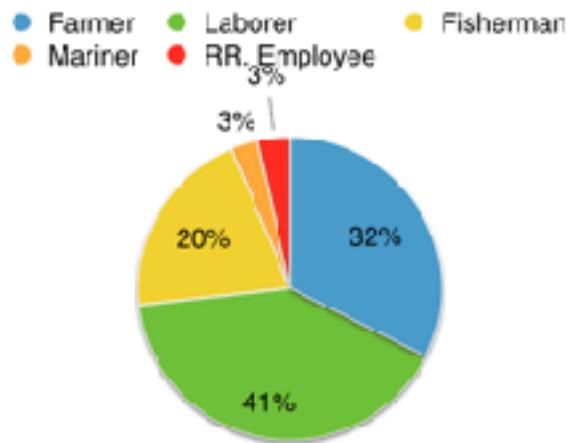
1903-

The Cumberland laborers appeared to be finished. Losing almost fifty men, they began their final downward slide. Farmers jumped up to seventy, while fishermen brought themselves up to forty-four. Traders dropped to zero, while clerks dropped by three. Mariners were effectively cut in half, with only seven listed, while railroad employees stayed steady at a comfortable four workers.



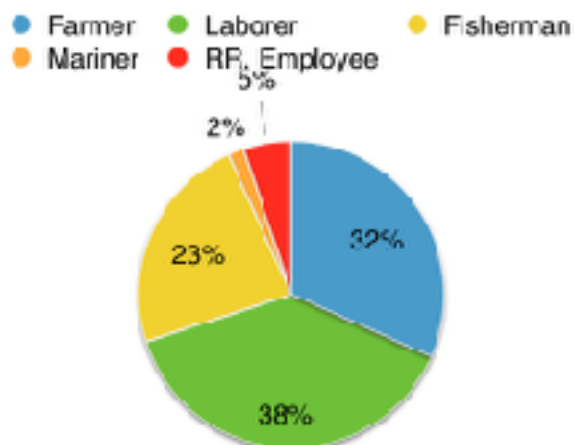
1905-

Yet again, the laborers leapt up to seventy-two, dashing all ideas that they might be phased out. Farmers slipped down by thirteen, and fishermen lost eight. Clerks were climbing again, and mariners were down to five. The railroad began to increase in number yet again, ascending from four workers to six.



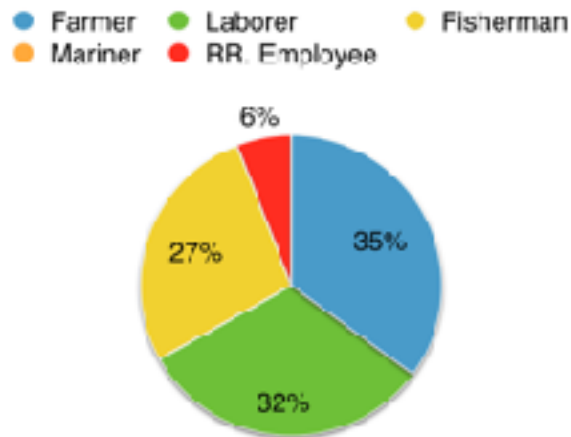
1907-

In 1907, laborers found themselves short four men, which did not really affect the greater scheme. Farmers were less one man, while fishermen had five more. Clerks moved back to their normal ten, while mariners dropped even lower to three, while the railroad climbed even higher to reach nine again.



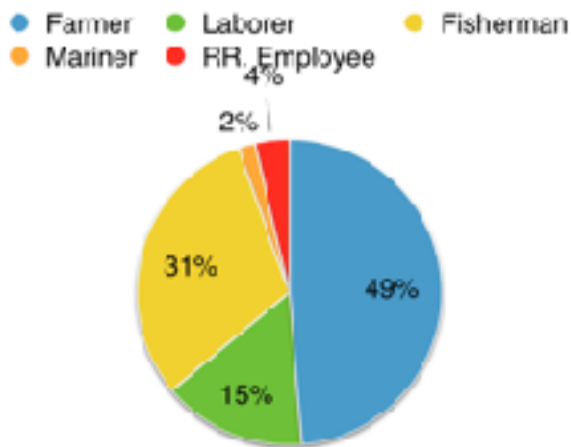
1909-

1909 would not prove to be a great year for the laborers. They fell down all the way to forty-nine, while farmers only dropped two, mirroring the fishermen. Clerks were less one, and many trades seemed to be extinct in the town. The mariners at this time were down to zero, many of them being entirely unfamiliar with the new steam ships, and therefore unable to work on them.



1917-

This was the year America joined the first World War. Laborers found their low of the first and second decades of the twentieth century, hitting seventeen. Farmers stayed steady at fifty-four, and fishermen settled down to thirty-four. Mariners gained two new young men who were able to work the steam engines, while the railroad lost five, possibly to the war effort.



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